

A Sound Word

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[0 : 00] Well, thanks so much. Good morning, everybody. It's good to be back at St. Marks. Great to be with you. I remember some years ago a chap in my congregation who had a wonderful home, great family, good job, living comfortably materially, phoned me up out of the blue and said, I have nowhere to go. And I wasn't quite sure what he meant.

I thought to myself, he has a wonderful home. He has a family. He has materially everything he wants. He came to church. He said to me, I'm not talking about what I have. I feel I just have no foundation.

And that is true, isn't it, of so many people who live in the world today, possibly true of yourself. Certainly true of many people we know. So with that in mind, let's have a look at this idea of foundations.

And as I say, we're going to be looking at this principle of the Christian foundation in life. Over the next few weeks, let's open up our Bible to Psalm 1. After serving 23 years in the ministry in Pretoria, around about four years ago, I came back to Cape Town to take up a lectureship at the Georgia College.

But because I grew up in Cape Town and into Kly, I decided just to go back and visit my old home. My folks have gone to be with the Lord.

[1 : 34] But I decided I would just go back and have a look at the old house. I had a moment of nostalgia. My folks purchased this house in 1967.

In fact, in those days, Takai was a farm. There was nothing there, just farmland. In fact, the only other house that was there in 1967 was the farmhouse. My folks' house, which my dad built, was the first house to go up in the Takai area.

It's quite something. And of course, going back there 40 years later, not that I hadn't been going back when I visited my folks over the years, but going back 40 years later, about four or so years ago, I was reminded of how the place had changed.

In fact, you, of course, would not recognize, if you'd lived in Takai in 1967, you just wouldn't recognize Cape Town today. You wouldn't recognize Takai today. But as I visited my folks' home and took a stroll down the road, the one thing that I noticed that hadn't changed, believe it or not, were the four or five oak trees that grow about 100 or so meters down the road from my folks' place there in Mountain View Crescent in Takai.

In fact, one of them was my headquarters when I was about seven years old. It still has the scratches that I put on it all those years ago.

[3 : 11] The trees remained the same. Now, if you remember the psalm read out to us a few moments ago, you'll see it's about a man or a woman described as a tree.

Isn't that interesting? It's an interesting metaphor. The trees outside my home 40 years later remind me of this psalm. Because it is a poem about a Christian person whose life is built on a foundation. It's a psalm about a life built on a real foundation in a world of people who have no foundations at all.

Now, how is the psalm laid out for us? It's not a very long psalm, but it has so much profundity for us. It has such a lot to tell us. If you have a look, you'll see that the first two verses introduce the blessed life to us.

And then from verses 3 to verse 5, you have a contrast between the blessed life versus that of the wicked from verse 3 to verse 5.

[4 : 27] And then finally, you'll see in verse 6, our writer wraps things up and speaks about the future. He speaks about the future of the blessed individual as contrasted with that of the wicked.

So let's follow that structure together today. Let's first of all cast our eyes over verse 1 and verse 2. Blessed is the man or the woman, of course, who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Now this psalm, by the way, is an introductory psalm. It's been placed there deliberately to introduce us to the other 149. In fact, the first two psalms are the archway through which we need to travel if we want to unlock the meaning of the other 148.

This psalm gives us an idea of the ideal reader of the Bible or the book of psalms. This is a picture of the ideal reader of the Bible, of the book of psalms, and of course, for us as Christians, the gospel.

It is a person who seeks the path of blessedness. And we'll also notice that the psalm depicts the Christian who travels on a very specific path whilst rooted on a very foundation, a very sure foundation.

[6 : 12] If you look at verse 1 very carefully, you will observe that the believer self-consciously chooses to walk down a specific path.

Now, if you know anything about life, you'll know that whoever you are today, whatever you're standing before Christ, we all, conscious or not, are on a form of pilgrimage.

We're all traveling on a certain path. What does it mean to be blessed? Blessed is the man. Psalm is a description of the life that is blessed.

Some would translate blessed as happy, but that's a superficial translation. A person can be profoundly unhappy and know very much that he is blessed at the same time.

Or a person might find oneself suffering, be in a very difficult position in life, as many of us here today are, and yet be profoundly aware of being in a state of blessedness.

[7 : 18] No, to be blessed is not necessarily to find oneself in a position of no suffering or to live a perfect life.

Now, according to the Bible, according to the Scriptures, the Psalm, to be blessed is to stand on a specific foundation. The foundation that results in the knowledge, the certain knowledge that I am rightly related to God.

Or to use New Testament language, to know that I am saved. That I know Christ and my sins are forgiven.

And so to be blessed is to be very close to possessing what Scripture calls shalom. Shalom.

Shalom in the Bible means a lot more than simply peace or the absence of being disturbed.

Shalom can be translated as a deep sense of rightness, being on the right path, or being related rightly to God, my neighbor, and the world.

[8 : 35] And yet, interestingly, as we look at the Psalm, in defining for us what blessedness is, our writer chooses, firstly, to present its negative or what blessedness is not.

Isn't that interesting? Here, the blessed path in the Psalm is described both negatively and positively.

In other words, the blessed man or the blessed woman is not only known by the path she chooses, but also the path he or she rejects.

To choose the way of the Gospel, to choose to stand on the foundation that is Christ, is to take a stand on certain things.

It means to reject what the Psalm will call the path of the wicked. The measure of a man or a woman's life is defined according to Scripture as much as by what he or she does not do as by what he or she does do.

[9 : 50] Now, that again is quite interesting because, as we know, in today's consumerist world, a person is defined by the choice of multiple options.

Somebody said to me some years ago in the ministry that they visited my church while I was pastor and they said, well, I believe all the religions because I want to keep all the options open.

Well, that is precisely not what the Psalm is teaching because there's only one God, there is only one path.

Well, let's have a look now at blessedness defined negatively. what the blessed man or woman does not do. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

So, when it comes to what the blessed man does or does not do, here you've got three doing words.

[10:59] Here you've got three verbs. Walk, stand, and sit. The Psalm illustrates how the blessed man reveals his blessedness in his choice to separate himself from those who have self-consciously chosen to walk upon another path and that is the path of wickedness.

In other words, the true believer is very careful in choosing her community, her mentors and guides. Consider those three doing words again. I suspect that they are meant to be comprehensive. They define all of life, walk, stand, and sit.

All of life and all of life's activities. However, we might look at these words slightly differently. It might, however, be suggested that this threefold of walking and standing and sitting describe an inevitable decline into evil.

First of all, somebody might walk in the advice and the counsel of the faithless. Then, after a while, choose to stand firm in their path, to be persuaded to adopt their ways.

[12:24] Then, finally, the sense of sitting down, this final decision, sitting down in the path of moral failure in the company of the wicked.

Now, we could suggest, tragically, his transformation is complete. He sits down in the seat of the wicked. He has become one of them.

Reminded of the words of Paul the apostle in Romans 1, where the apostle writes, though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

Like Israel's true godly elders at the gate of the city in the ancient world in Jerusalem, well, the wicked also gather. They also come together, but their ends are wicked.

no, what is being described here is that the righteous man does not take this path. He has made a very specific lifestyle decision not to allow the opinions, the views, and the morality of our fickle age to influence his path.

[13:42] path. Now, it is true, is it not, that if you don't choose, you'll observe, I'm not asking you whether or not you are a person who goes to church or not, because you can go to church but not really think these issues through.

Now, if you don't choose, if you don't carefully choose the path, your path, self-consciously, the world and its values will do it for you.

And, of course, the wicked will laugh at the righteous person. We know that, do we not? If we are righteous and we rub shoulders with unbelievers in our home and in the workplace, well, of course, the world only recognizes the qualifications that the world offers.

The world will look at the righteous and will laugh. They will call him or her old-fashioned, too conservative, out-of-date and just plain silly and ineffectual.

But who are the wicked here in the psalm? The righteous man or woman does not walk in the path of the wicked. Who are the wicked?

[15:01] I commented on the wicked some time ago when I preached here on Psalm 73. The wicked or the rasha are described in the psalms using more than one word.

We can translate the original as sinners or mockers or as faithless or even failures.

Now, these are not simply people who have made mistakes in life. We all, from time to time, do things we regret and repent of. We all make mistakes. Now, the wicked here are individuals who have deliberately and consciously chosen to walk a path in life that deviates from Christ, deviates from that which Christ has ordained for his people.

And they know it, but they are not open to change. In other words, like the blessed individual, like the Christian, the wicked have also made a conscious choice.

They have chosen to live in a different world to that of the righteous. In other words, they ground themselves in themselves. That's what the wicked do.

[16:19] Reminded of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 7 verse 13, where the Lord said, enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction.

and many enter through it. Of course, the world will tell you that the broad road to destruction is labeled the narrow road to life.

In other words, the wicked are people who have deliberately made a choice to reject the foundation of the word of God and the gospel. Well, we've looked at what the blessed person does not do.

Now, let's look at blessedness defined positively in verse 2. His or her delight is in the law of God and on his law he meditates day and night.

So what do people who are blessed by God actually do? They delight in Torah. They delight in law. Torah should be translated as God's instruction.

[17 : 23] instruction. In other words, we're not simply speaking of those rules in the Bible that say don't do this or don't do that. That's the way sometimes we look at this principle of law or laws.

But what our writer means is all of God's instruction, the foundation of all of God's word, the very counsel of God.

For us, this of course would be the whole of scripture and most importantly the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ and his teachings. Our way as Christians of focusing on the Torah, of course, means focusing on Jesus as he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

So the focus of the blessed is not so much myself, my wealth, or even my vocation, but the Lord's instruction in the gospel.

That is the foundation of my life. And we'll observe here that he delights in the Torah. God's word, the gospel, has captivated his heart.

[18 : 32] He loves the gospel. The word is not a burdensome thing to him. Many have said to me over the years, it's horrible, it must be horrible to be a Christian because all you've got to do all the time is keep the rules.

Well, of course, that misunderstands the gospel, it misunderstands the life of blessedness. coming under the instruction of God, submitting one's life to the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel sets one free.

It's not a burden at all. Because to delight in the gospel, to delight in the law, is to delight in Jesus himself. And it is to be transformed by it.

And by the way, the word meditate here is not the silly idea of sitting cross-legged in your back garden and humming the way some funny people do follow strange religion.

It's not at all. Meditate here means more than just reading. It means to absorb the word of God, to absorb the gospel, to reflect on it, to grapple with it, to process it through your life's experiences.

[19 : 42] The law is not merely for this man or this woman in outer reality, to study from afar. No, this man has internalized the word of God, internalized the gospel.

It has become part of him or her. Now let's have a look at verses 3 to verse 5 where we have the blessed life contrasted with that of the wicked. Very, very powerful words here.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither. in all that he does he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. And therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

So now the comparison between the blessed and the wicked of verses 1 and 2, this comparison is taken even further and now the psalmist sets up these two incredible comparisons.

[20 : 46] two similes. And of course we'll appreciate that this particular comparison has been given to us under the inspiration of God's spirit and thus have an incredible amount of wisdom and power to offer us.

The righteous are compared to a tree like those oak trees outside my folks' house. Standing there 40 years and more later, a tree planted by a stream that the wicked are like chaff after a harvest. Let's have a look briefly at those two similes in more detail. The blessed life, says our writer, is like a fruit bearing tree by the stream.

Now in the Middle Eastern climate, as we know, the long dry season comes when a fruit tree most needs water as its fruit grows to maturity.

And therefore, it needs to be placed near a water supply where its roots can reach. And in the Near East, therefore, you've got to plant a tree very carefully.

[21 : 57] But if you do, if you plant the tree on the right foundation, throughout its life, this tree bears fruit consistently. I love that part of the picture here.

It's a tree that is consistent. Every season, this tree and its fruit can be relied upon. We've got a picture of somebody who is consistent.

The gospel turns people into consistent people in their godliness. Always used to get concerned in the ministry when folk would suddenly get excited about the church and would want to get involved and come into Bible study and helping out in the church and then after a couple of months they'd

fall away.

The world would persuade them to go off and do something else. Now, that's not the kind of person we have here. The point of this particular picture, and it is a point that is given to us by the Spirit himself.

It's an inspired psalm. we must not forget. It is a life of solidity. It is a life here of stability and substance.

[23 : 15] The psalmist doesn't deny that Christians suffer, but the psalmist insists that overall those blessed by God enjoy a real foundation, as we're going to see, God willing, over the next three weeks.

Enjoy a real purpose and a sense of stability in their lives. There's something solid about Christians. They know who they are, and they are rooted into God's reality, the only reality, and not the passing, fading reality of this world.

They have set down roots into something that is eternal, the gospel itself, and as a result, their lives bear fruit in season.

There's something predictable and consistent about Christians, even if they're imperfect. Those wonderful words of the Lord Jesus Christ read out to us earlier from Matthew 7, and therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain comes and all the problems of the world come, but that person remains stable and consistent. The rain comes, the streams rose, says the Lord Jesus, and the winds blew and beat against that house.

[24 : 34] Well, in the case of the wicked, the house falls with a crash because there's no foundation. But it's not the case of the man or the woman who put his words into practice.

Now, what about the wicked from verse 4 to verse 5? We've looked at this magnificent portrayal of a gospel person. What about the wicked? Well, it's the opposite.

You see the power of the comparison? Israelites in the ancient world, they would harvest the crop, perhaps it would be wheat, and they would take all the contents of the harvest and put it into these big baskets in the wind and they would throw the contents of the harvest into the air and the solid parts, the parts that could be used would fall back down into the basket.

But the chaff, the rubbish, the lightweight, unusable waste would be blown away in the wind. chaff. What a tragic and yet powerfully true picture. It's a contrast, is it not, between a life of substance versus a life of no importance or weight at all.

[25 : 57] The lives of wicked people at the end of the day will be seen to have no real consequence influence or substance. If you know anything about the world and you've been around the block a few times, you'll know that's true.

Perhaps tragically you will have to acknowledge that you're one of those people. Recently I visited a close family member who was terminally ill and as much as I loved him, I realized that much of his life would fit into this terrible picture of chaff.

He knew the gospel but rejected it. Of course, the older you get, the less options you have, the less time you have to change. not a Christian here today, remember that.

Time is running out. What a powerful and yet tragic metaphor. The lives of wicked people at the end of the day will be seen to have had no real consequence or substance, no solidity, no gravitas.

Their lives are flitted away like ash in the wind. They easily change. It's true, isn't it? They move one way today and then the next. There's no consistency.

[27 : 28] And of course, it doesn't always seem to be like that. There will be times when the world, of course, will praise the wicked. At times, it will seem as if the wicked prosper and the righteous are rather blown away like chaff.

But, of course, our inspired writer reminds us that that is an illusion. So, in conclusion, as I close, as we prepare our hearts for the supper of the Lord, just three quick observations as we wrap up.

Well, of course, verse 6, you've got the future of the blessed contrasted with that of the wicked in verse 6. The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

That's his summary. And by the way, this idea of God watching over is not an intellectual watching from afar.

The idea of watching here is very similar to the idea of Adam entering into a close relationship with Eve. Adam knowing Eve. It is an intimate watching.

[28 : 33] It is a picture of God being intimately involved in the lives of his children. Whatever they're going through, whatever you are going through, God, if you are a child of Jesus, God is actively involved in your life.

It's an intimacy. God is active in the lives of his children in a way that he's not in the lives of wicked people. Furthermore, this psalm depicts as we wrap up what reality is, just like all of the Bible. Let me say that again. What the Bible does is it depicts for us what reality really is, not what reality sometimes appears to be.

Now, the reason why I need to say that to you and to me, by the way, is because as we experience life and its difficulties, we will be tempted, won't be, to reject the biblical gospel reality.

We'll be tempted to reject God's way of doing things and viewing things and rather believe in the world, rather believe in the propaganda of the internet or the multimedia age in which we live, rather believe in what we see, not in what we know in the gospel to be true.

[29 : 52] Say that to those of us here who are perhaps tempted to wander away from the gospel. Perhaps you're going through a tough time right now and you're being tempted to wander away from the path that you know to be real.

And it's important for me to say to you today, don't do it. Don't do it. We need to trust God's foundation, God's reality and not that which the wicked try to sell us.

The psalm also, by the way, reminds us that there are only two real choices that lie before us. Our Hollywood world teaches us, as we've seen, that there are allegedly millions of choices for us to make and we can change our lives whenever we want and we can make up our own reality and we can make up our own truth.

If you look at the psalm and if you look at scripture you will understand that God tells us that reality is not ours. Reality is not ours to make and to invent and control.

Reality is God's and at the end of the day in scripture, contrary to our multimedia age, there are only two paths that are available to us.

[31 : 11] There are only two choices in life, the choice of the righteous and the path of the wicked. The psalm reminds us that we live in a moral universe and that there are real and possibly terrible eternal consequences to the decisions we make.

Say that to those here who are indeed on the path that leads to destruction. Let me ask you, are you on that path? You know who you are.

You might be able to fool your neighbors and fool members of your family. You can't fool God. What path are you on? And then finally, of course, the psalm explains what it means to trust Jesus.

We read the psalm as Christian people. We are reminded that Jesus himself endorsed the path of the blessed person and the pursuit of faith in him when he said in Matthew 5 and verse 6, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be fulfilled.

Jesus shows us how trusting in him truly defines what the path of blessedness really means. And as we read the psalm as Christians today, we discover that whether or not we are on that path that leads to life or the path that leads to destruction really depends on whether or not you trust in Jesus Christ.

[32 : 40] As we come to the Lord's Supper, this is an all-important question. What path are you on? Amen.