

The Prosperous Life

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[0 : 01] Well, do take up your Bible and we're going to read together this evening from the very beginning of the book of Psalms, Psalm number 1. I think that's page 448 if you have one of the red church visitors' Bibles.

And we're going to spend the next three Sunday evenings looking at this little psalm. It may seem short, it is short, but as I think we meditate on it, we will see just how rich it is and just how much there is there for our learning, for our instruction and for our encouragement.

So you'll notice in our Bibles it says book 1, there are five books of Psalms. We call it the book of Psalms, but there are five sections in the Psalms.

If you take care to read through, you'll see that that's how it's divided up in our version so that we can see it. And this is the very first Psalm of the very first book of the five books of Psalms.

And it said, Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, stands not in the way of sinners, and sits not in the seat of scoffers.

[1 : 25] I'm reading it like that to emphasize the way it's meant to be in the original. Three notes. Not these things, but his delight is in the law or the instruction of the Lord.

And on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. Not so the wicked.

They're like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Amen.

[2 : 35] May God bless to us his word. Well, do turn with me to Psalm number 1, page 448 in the Red Bibles.

And we're going to give some time to thinking about this this evening and over the next couple of weeks. The book of Psalms is, of course, very well known.

At least some Psalms, I suppose, are very well known, aren't they? Everybody knows Psalm 23, probably one of the commonest Psalms people know who never come to church because it's so often sung at funerals, isn't it?

And in Scotland, I suppose, many of the Psalms are known. Other ones that would be well known would be like the Hundred Psalm, the Old Hundred, all people that on earth do dwell. Certainly when I was growing up, most folk would have known that Psalm.

And I hope that we know many more than those. And it's often said that the Psalms, the book of Psalms, is the Old Testament church's hymn book. Or indeed, the whole church's hymn book.

[3 : 39] And of course, it is good to sing the Psalms, as we've done this evening, as we do often. But of course, we mustn't stop there because it's much more than a great hymn book.

Like all real Christian songs, and that is not all of those that pass for Christian songs, but all real Christian songs are rich in theology.

That is, rich in teaching about God. As are all the scriptures, of course. The scriptures are teaching about God in words that God himself has given us.

Teaching about God in God's words, not man's words, which is why they're so valuable to us. And the Psalms are that. They teach us about God. The great 4th century church father, Athanasius, said that in the book of Psalms, we have the epitome of the whole scriptures.

And that's one of the great features of the Psalms, that we have so much richness in teaching us about God. But it's no dry theology, is it?

[4 : 45] The Psalms are rich in emotion, in feeling, in passion. They're theology in the raw, if you like. They're full of real life.

Well, I suppose all the scriptures, too, are full of real life. None of the scriptures are like the theology books on my shelf. Thank God for that. None of them have a story as thrilling and as exciting as the one we read this morning about Nebuchadnezzar.

And none of them have anything like the emotion and the passion that we find in the Psalms. And the Psalms encompass so much of teaching about God and about God in relation to us.

John Calvin says in the Psalms we have an anatomy of all parts of the soul. Every part of the way that we relate to God. So the Psalms are a great teaching resource.

And you can see that actually in the ordering of the Psalms. As I said at the beginning, there are five books of Psalms. Look at the very beginning there. Book one, it says, before Psalm one.

[5 : 46] Probably, we can't be sure, but probably it was composed deliberately in that way and set out in that way to mirror the five books of Moses. The first five books of the Bible, the Torah.

And if that's the case, then it's just reinforcing to us that the Psalms are also Torah, law, instruction, God's instruction for our lives. And in that regard, then, it is certainly no accident that Psalms one and two come at the very beginning.

Well, obviously, numbers one and two come at the beginning. But these particular Psalms come at the very beginning of the Psalter. There's something like a gateway to the whole of the book of Psalms.

So that everything else that you read all the way through the book must be read in the light of these two. You might see in the footnote in some Bibles, it tells us that actually Psalm one and two might well have been one Psalm in the beginning.

That's been split up into two. But both of these Psalms, Psalm one and Psalm two, are all about the way of blessing. In other words, they're like the basics that you have to get straight before you begin to grasp anything else about the spiritual life.

[7 : 00] Look at the first word of Psalm one. What is it? Blessed. Look down to the last line of Psalm two. What's the word?

Blessed. Blessed. You see, take together these two Psalms. And what we're being given here is the gateway to blessing in human life.

And these two Psalms point us to two fundamental things. Stay with Psalm two. Look at verse 12. What is the way to blessing? Verse 12. Kiss the Son.

Kiss the Son. Take refuge in Him. Well, of Psalm two, if you take time to read it, is about the key to world history. It's all about the triumph of God's Son, God's King enthroned in Zion.

And the way of blessing for the whole world is one way alone. It is rejoicing in Him. Kissing Him.

Taking refuge in Him. That's the way to blessing. And Psalm one, in a similar way, is about the key to personal happiness and prosperity in life.

[8 : 09] As we're going to see, it's all about rejoicing in God's law. Verse one of Psalm one.

Blessed is the man who, verse two, delights in the law of the Lord, the instruction of the Lord.

Now, that's the basics. That's the ABC of the way of life that makes sense on this earth. The Psalms speak about all sorts of different circumstances of life.

They express joy. They express sorrow. They express friendship. They express what it is to have foes and enemies. They express great ecstasies of joy, but terrible outpourings of grief.

Terrible expressions of trouble. Every circumstance you can think of. But whatever the circumstances, the way of life is this.

It's remembering that God's Son rules the cosmos. And so we must rejoice in Him and submit to Him. And it's remembering that God's Word directs the cosmos.

[9 : 14] And so we must rejoice in hearing and in obeying His voice. That is the key to life. That's the way to life. So right at the beginning of the book of Psalms, Psalm one gives us the key to happiness.

The key to permanent personal prosperity. That's the meaning of the word blessed. Right at the beginning of this psalm. It means happiness. Full and free.

It could be translated, oh the happiness of this man. Oh the fulfillment. The bliss even. Greatly to be envied is this man.

You could paraphrase it. This person has everything that we all want to have. And in fact this person is everything that deep down we all want to be.

This is what we're looking for. We want to be this person. Blessed. Blessed. Go out into our city today. Go and ask your fellow students.

[10:18] Your fellow workers. Ask your family. Ask your friends. They're seeking for this. Blessing. That's the life that they're looking for. All the self-help books.

All the articles in your newspapers at this time of year. Telling you about New Year diets. Exercise regimes. All the rest of it. All the latest things. They're all searching for this. They're all searching for the way of blessedness.

That's what this is about. The elusive fulfillment in life. The richness. The blessing that we all want. And the psalmist begins his book with that very subject.

The happiness that we're all seeking. Well rightly so. And he tells us. Very very boldly. He tells us. He has got the key. To all of that.

Yes he has the key to true happiness. To true fulfillment. To true salvation. Satisfaction. And in this psalm he gives us three pictures. Of what that true happiness is.

[11:16] And where it can be found. And where it can't be found. And he tells us that true happiness is. Found in the prosperous life. And that that true blessedness is found to be in the end.

The only permanent life. And he tells us that it comes only one way. And that is. Through walking the way of a penitent life. And we're going to look at each of these. Over the next three Sunday evenings together.

So we get a real grip of this psalm. Sometimes it's good just to slow down isn't it. And focus on one little piece of scripture for a little longer. I had a letter from Dick Lucas there.

Just after Christmas. And he was bemoaning that he'd been hearing several sermons on enormous great long parts of scripture. And he just couldn't keep up. And he said, I'm retaliating. I'm going to speak at a minister's conference soon.

And I'm giving them a seven part sermon series on Psalm 23. So I wrote back and said, well I can't quite match you. But we're going to try three on Psalm 1. So sometimes it is good to just slow down and immerse ourselves in a psalm like this or a scripture like this.

[12:20] So this evening we're going to focus on just the first of these three things. And that is the prosperous life. The life of present prosperity. And the message is very clear.

It's right there in the middle verses. In verses 3 and 4 of this psalm. And what this psalmist is telling us is this. Only the Christian life is a truly prosperous life in this present world.

Look at verses 3 and 4. He, the Christian believer, is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season.

And its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Not so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind drives away.

So do you see there? It's so stark, isn't it? In contrast to what so many people today think and believe. It is not those who scorn and ignore God's words and God's laws who will prosper and have fruitful lives.

[13:31] It's those who delight in God's word. It's those who follow God's ways who will know the true happiness of a fulfilled life on this earth.

This earthly life. That's what these verses are telling us absolutely plainly. Verse 3 is a beautiful picture, isn't it? It's a beautiful picture of present prosperity. It's a lovely picture of healthy, vibrant, fruit-bearing trees planted as it is beside a stream of sweet water.

There's nothing more wonderful in a dry climate, in an arid climate, than to suddenly see lush green foliage covered in brightly colored fruit.

Because it's growing by beautiful, well-watered springs. Remember the psalmist didn't live in Scotland like we do. There's plenty of green leaves here. We don't have any shortage of water, do we?

That's why I get so irritated at these ridiculous toilet systems we all have to have now, where you press the button and hardly anything comes out. I'm hoping one, if anything good can come out of Brexit, I'm hoping we'll get back to having proper toilets that flush properly.

[14:39] Anyway, even that would be perhaps too much to ask now. But anyway, in Scotland we don't want shade, do we? We don't want water, we want sunshine. That's why so many of us like me have enjoyed chopping down trees in our gardens.

So even when the sun finally does shine, you actually can see the sun. But it's the opposite when you live in a dry, hot country, isn't it? It's the absolute opposite of that if you're in a desert place, in a barren desert.

The image, think of those western films and so on, the image of barren desert is a spiky, leafless, dead tree, isn't it? And what you want to see is the oasis, which is full of vibrant life. And what's that signified by? It's signified by a tree full of green leaves, full of lush fruit. And so this in verse 3 is a picture of that. It's a picture of a life that is steady and stable. That's unmoved. That's strong. That's solid. Sturdy. Its leaf does not wither. It's strong. [15:44] It's sturdy. But it's not dull. It's not lifeless. It's growing. The picture the psalmist uses isn't just of a wall or a tower. Something that's sturdy but is just cold and stony.

It's a tree. It's alive. It's growing. It's productive. It's creative. It yields its fruit in season. Not like our supermarket soup fruit, which is so often out of season, isn't it?

You can buy raspberries and strawberries in January, but it'll taste like potatoes. But this is the sweet, delicious, seasoned fruit of a tree bearing that fruit in the way that it's meant to do. Because it's dependably drawing on the nutrients, on the air, on the sun, above all, on the water. And that's why it's producing something that's tasty, that's delightful, that's fruitful and wonderful. And it's a picture, isn't it, of a human life that is productive and prosperous as it should be. That's taken all the natural endowments, the gifts that it has by nature, the opportunities that it's been given, and reaching its full potential.

[17:04] Abundantly fruitful. There's absolutely nothing unattractive, is there, in this picture of the fruitful life. This is the kind of life that any right-thinking person longs for and wants to be.

There's nothing spurious. There's no false dawns about this tree. There's no fleeting thing about it. Look at verse 3. Its leaf does not wither. That doesn't mean it's unnatural.

It doesn't mean it's a tree that is immune from autumn. That's not what he's saying. But he's saying it's immune from the withering effects of drought. Because it's rooted in that well-watered soil.

There's nothing so tragic, is there, as the abundantly fruitful and prosperous life that is suddenly blighted at its prime. It's often happens, doesn't it, in the world of the arts.

The artist or the composer that does such beautiful work, makes such beautiful music, and then suddenly drops out. Perhaps it's suicide or a tragic drug overdose or something.

[18:09] A waste of talent. Somebody just gets into the wrong company, who gets bad advice or whatever it is, and a glittering career just suddenly hits the skids. And all of a sudden, what was fruitful becomes just blighted.

Nothing. Such a disappointment. Sudden wilt. That sometimes happens, doesn't it, in the garden. You have a beautiful shrub or a beautiful rose or whatever it is, and suddenly you go out one day and something has happened.

Some sort of disease has hit it. And overnight, almost, it wilts. But so often in our human world, that's the case, isn't it? Some of you will be old enough to remember the great footballer George Best.

Perhaps one of the greatest footballers we've ever seen in this country. Age 27. The height of his powers. He ended up into retirement.

Became a hopeless alcoholic. Just went downhill forever and ever. I saw a picture the other day in the paper of Paul Gascoigne in his prime, standing beside Margaret Thatcher. Maybe some of you saw that picture.

[19:13] What a tragedy. And countless others, aren't there, whose life in the limelight, whose fame, whose fruitfulness suddenly is just blighted.

And I suspect many of us will know people ourselves in our own experience. Friends, relatives, others whose life has suddenly been blighted like that.

And the psalmist is saying, this man is not like that. There's no false promise about this life. He's strong. He's stable. He's rooted for growth. He is steadily and dependably faithful.

He's prosperous. He does not disappoint. His leaf does not wither. That's the kind of man you want your daughter to marry, isn't it?

Or the kind of woman you want your son to marry. It's the kind of person that you want to be yourself, isn't it, as a Christian believer. Everything he does prospers.

[20:19] It's an astonishing claim, isn't it? Can that really be true? Can it be? Or is this some kind of Charlotte and prosperity gospel? Some kind of prosperity preacher who's after our money, who's offering dreams come true, but they really are too good to be true?

No. And this is a categorical claim. There is no caveat about it in this psalm. It seems so hard to believe that anyone could know such complete prosperity, such complete blessedness, satisfaction

in this life.

Especially when we sometimes hear of what people say of their own lives, even when it seems to us that they must have everything that there is to have in life.

We think about the celebrities, the rich, the famous, the most successful people in life. And sometimes it staggers us, doesn't it, to hear what they say when they're being really honest. I remember reading an interview with the pop star Madonna.

Multi-millionaire, worldwide success. All the prosperity, all the fame that she wants. But in this interview she said this, I'm a very tormented person. I want to be happy.

[21 : 34] Isn't that astonishing? I remember reading the biography, or I think it was the autobiography, wasn't it, of the modern artist, Tracy Emin. And in her book she said about this, despite all her success, all her wealth, all her achievement, everything, she said, in terms of emotional values, I'm a loser.

Isn't that amazing? I'm constantly astonished at how dissatisfied so many very, very successful people are. So it's hard to believe that this kind of prosperity, this kind of fulfilling, satisfied fruitfulness described in verse 3, so hard to believe it really is possible.

And it's also hard, I think, to believe verse 4, not so the wicked. That really does seem to be a problem because often it seems to us that the most satisfied, the most prosperous people are. Often those of very dubious reputation or ill repute. And they don't seem to be just like verse 4 says, chaff, blown away by the wind. They actually seem to be those who really are prospering.

Well, we need to consider some things in answer to that. And first is, of course, that this present life does not tell the whole story.

[22 : 55] There is more to life than the transience of the present day and its prosperity. There is the permanence of eternity to consider. And we're going to come back to that next time when we look at verses 5 and 6.

But second, there's also, of course, the identification of who exactly are the righteous and who exactly are the wicked. There's a very stark contrast between the two in this psalm and indeed all the way through the Bible.

That's a crucial question. And again, we'll come back to that. And the answer might be very surprising for some of us. But for now, let's stick to this life in the present, to the promise of true prosperity that the psalmist gives us.

Who is this man who has prosperity in every way, who lives this fruitful, fulfilled life, who is satisfied with the labor of his hands, whose food is unfading and not disappointing?

Well, for the answer, look at verse 2. Who is it? It's the man, he says, who delights in the law of the Lord. It's the person whose daily life is directed in every way by the living word of God.

[24 : 10] His delight is in the law, the instruction of the Lord. And on his instruction, he meditates day and night. It's as simple as that. And the wicked who are not so, who don't know, and who can't know that truly fulfilling happiness, who are they?

Well, look at verse 1. They're the ones who walk away from God's word. They're the ones who scoff, who scorn God's words and God's ways. See, the Bible is very clear.

There is a cost, isn't there, to the Christian life. There is a cross to bear. There are deaths to die to be faithful to God's word. But the Bible also tells us that they are sweet deaths and that there is wonderful gain.

Ultimately, of course, we will come to that next time. But also there is wonderful gain even now in this present life. There is blessedness. As this psalmist says, there is happiness and joy in a productive and fruitful life in the way of the Lord.

And that is because, friends, God's ways, God's instruction, God's laws are the best ways and the best instruction for human life and happiness and fruitfulness and flourishing.

[25 : 28] And if you think otherwise, according to the Bible, you're just a fool. Even though the world constantly wants us to think otherwise and pretends otherwise.

Just think of one example. One among millions there could be. God's word, God's instruction, calls for fidelity and faithfulness in marriage.

Our world demands freedom to do as we please, to sleep with whoever we want and whenever we want. So let me ask you this question.

Whose law do you want your spouse to listen to? God's or the world's? Whether you're married now or whether you hope to be married one day. Who do you want your spouse to listen to on that one?

God's or the world's? We know, don't we, that the world's promised freedom, in fact, actually leads to bondage. It leads to brokenness. It leads to disappointment.

[26 : 29] It leads to misery. And in just this one area alone, this area of sexual relationships, the result in our society of collectively walking away from God's instruction as to how to do this properly, so as to flourish truly as human beings.

Walking away from that and scoffing at that, scoffing at his pattern. Walking away from that has led, arguably, to one of the greatest scourges of the past 50 years and one of the greatest causes of disadvantage and disease and poverty among children and young people.

The more that our culture has asserted sexual freedom, so-called, and made sex our God, the more that God has both exploited us and disappointed us.

Isn't that the truth? Well, listen to some of the statistics. Currently in the UK, 42% of marriages end in divorce. And half of those within the first 10 years of marriage.

But in fact, since many, many fewer marriages are even happening nowadays, and more people are just cohabiting, actually the picture is far, far worse than just 42% for fractured and broken relationships.

[27 : 51] Fully two-thirds of all cohabiting parents split up. And it's much, much higher still where there are no children in that relationship.

The breakup of cohabiting parents accounts for 80% of all family ruptures. Half or more of children being born today won't be living with both parents by the time they're 16 years of age.

So those who scoff at God's instruction, and those who lead others to walk away from it, in chasing after so-called freedom and liberation, what in fact they have done is not lead them into a nirvana of so-called human freedom and flourishing.

But in fact, they've led them into a great deal of misery and suffering and disappointment. There is vast, vast sociological evidence now that shows us absolutely plainly that parental breakup damages children.

It diminishes their achievement. It diminishes their health. It diminishes their future prospects. But successive governments of every color have just done more and more and more to undermine marriage.

[29 : 07] And you know what? That has disproportionately affected the poorest in our society. It is overwhelmingly among the lowest income families that marriage is the least prevalent.

Did you know that? And so despite the higher divorce rate, marriage is still a far more stable relationship for bringing up children than cohabitation is.

So as one writer has commented, after imposing their liberal views on the poorest, it's the better off who are just reaping the benefits of marriage mainly for themselves.

See, the war on marriage is a war on the weak, the weakest in society. That means, doesn't it, as Christians today, we don't have to be on the back foot if we're defending and promoting proper marriage.

Because to protect and to promote marriage is as much a campaign for social justice and as much a campaign for social mobility as it is for moral integrity. That's very important.

[30 : 11] Glenn Harrison, who spoke so helpfully at our Gospel Partnership Conference here last year, is absolutely right when he says this. For Christians, the promotion of strong marriages and families is potentially one of the most fruitful contributions to the common goal.

That's just one area. One area alone where we as Christian people can say to the world with absolute confidence, blessed are those whose delight is in the instruction of the Lord and not in the counsel of scoffers who dismiss his words and ways.

Just look at where those words and those ways will take you and have taken so many in our society. No, the way of real prosperity. And real prosperity, friends, we know deep down, don't we?

We know real prosperity is relational prosperity. Real prosperity is found by those who heed him, who love God's words, who live by God's word, by his instruction for life.

That's the way to present prosperity, to true prosperity, to the happiness of real fruitful human flourishing life here on this earth.

[31 : 25] Whatever apparent costs there might be. So let's just dwell on that. And let me close by saying two things as we begin this year of 2019, as we look ahead to a new year of life as Christian people and of life as a Christian church.

First, we can be confident, we need have absolutely no doubts whatsoever that the key to a happy and fruitful and satisfying life this year is to be found in delighting in the word of God, in hearing and obeying the word of God and not the word of this world, not imbibing the words and the ways of our culture.

Don't be in any doubt about that. Not an iota. And secondly, we can be confident that every Christian believer can have a fruitful and fulfilling life.

Every ordinary person who loves God's word and who listens to God's word will prosper and bear fruit, sweet fruit, good fruit, and fruit that will last in their life.

Every ordinary Christian believer who loves and lives God's word. Some Christians sometimes think they need all sorts of special callings, special blessings, special experiences in life.

[32 : 54] Crave after the elusive way of blessing. It's not elusive. It's the first verse of the first psalm, of the first book of Psalms. The key to a life of true spiritual prosperity is simple.

And it's available to all. It is to delight in the word of God. It's to meditate on it day and night. It's to make it part and parcel of the very fabric of your whole outlook on life.

That is the way of blessing. It's as simple as that. It's not easy, but it is most certainly not complicated.

It's a promise for every ordinary Christian believer, whoever you are, whatever it is you do. If you love God's word, and if you live God's word, none of your working life, your business life, your professional life, none of it will be in vain.

It will be fruitful in God's name. None of your family life will be in vain. It will prosper under God. And none of your Christian life, your struggles, none of your church life, nothing that we do together, our labor in the Lord, none of it will be in vain.

[34 : 13] If we love God's word together, and if we live it together, none of our labors for him will wither on the vine. Isn't that a great encouragement as we start a new year?

Because God's word directs his world. Therefore, blessed is the man and the woman and the boys and girls who delight in the law of the Lord and who make that instruction their life.

Because he or she, verse 3, is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, its leaf does not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Well, let's pray together. Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, stands not in the way of sinners, sits not in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord.

And on his law, they meditate day and night. Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digestion, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, which we may embrace and ever hold fast, we may do so to the blessed hope of everlasting life which you've given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[36 : 03] Christ. Amen. Well, we're going to sing together and encourage one another in the words of number 663 in the blue hymn books.

Oh, walk with Jesus and you will know how deep, how wide his love can flow. They only fail to prove his love who in the ways of sinners rove.

Number 663. Number 663.