

Reformation
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There is nothing in our experience, however trivial, worldly, or even evil, which cannot be thought about Christianly. There is likewise nothing in our experience, however sacred, which cannot be thought about secularly—considered, that is to say, simply in its relationship to the passing existence of bodies and psyches in a time-locked universe.

Harry Blamires

God certainly abases the pride of men, but he does not despise the mind which he himself has made.

John R. W. Stott

The Way of Blessing

R. Kent Hughes

The first Psalm of our sacred Psalter is the doorway to the remaining 149 Psalms, and is foundational to all the blessings which follow in the Psalms. This beautifully crafted wisdom Psalm describes the pathway to blessing. If followed in one's heart, it guarantees divine blessing in the life of God's child.

The Road to Avoid

There is a path which the truly "blessed" avoid at all costs, set forth in terms of negation in verse one: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers." No one ever has or ever will be blessed who follows such a path.

It is important to note, as we begin, that the forbidden path becomes increasingly dark and permanent as it is followed. The three verbs "walk," "stand," and "sit" are meant to make this absolutely clear. Initially one begins *walking* in the counsel of the wicked. Then this person begins to *stand* around with them. And finally, he or she *sits* down with them—having gone from bad to worse! These three deadly postures portray an increasing entanglement in deeper sin. As one walks he takes evil counsel; when he stands he is fixed more permanently in the way of evil; and finally when he sits, he has descended to scoffing. He has become a detractor.

It is a terrible, insidious progression. Here's how it works in modern life.

Intellectual Walk. First, a person begins to "walk in the counsel of the wicked." That is, he gets his advice, his philosophy of life, from ungodly people. In the present day, a fundamental tenet of the counsel of the wicked is that God does not exist, or if He does, He is too weak to do anything. This view, of course, poses huge problems intellectually for the unbeliever, but he rarely thinks them out—as it was in

the case of a student Stuart Briscoe encountered. Briscoe began the conversation by asking, "Are you alive?"

"Yeah," the boy said, looking startled.

"Why are you alive?" was Briscoe's next question.

"Because I was born and haven't died."

"Did you have anything to do with your birth?"

"No, except I was there!"

"Do you plan on having anything to do with your death?"

"No."

"Then as far as you are concerned, your birth was an accident and your death will be an accident."

"I suppose you're right."

"Then I know what you are. You are an accident suspended between accidents."

The student looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "You know something, that helps me understand myself better than anything I've ever heard."¹

The "counsel of the wicked" leads to massive intellectual conundrums if people think it out, but most people never do.

We must also realize that "the counsel of the wicked" is most often not so blatantly atheistic. More often such counsel simply empties God of His holiness and transcendence and replaces Him with a god who is like oneself, who bends with the times, who bends with the flow of culture. Their view of God and themselves comes from a group-think of culture. Church people often fall to this kind of god, whose amorphous "love" flows to cover a multitude of their sins—so they think.

Moral Stand. Both the atheism of the unchurched and the practical atheisms of the church prepare the victim for the next step downward which is to "stand in the way of sinners."

In the Hebrew "sinners" means those who "miss the mark." And it is a tragically accurate description of their

plight because when one has followed "the counsel of the wicked" it is impossible to see the mark (right or wrong) clearly. When you cannot see God's standards clearly, you will not be aware that you're missing them. You naturally become part of the group which falls short of God's righteousness. The tragedy is increased because the sinner is more permanently enmeshed here, having switched from walking to standing—motionless, fixed.

Perverse Seat. The ultimate comes when these finally "sit in the seat of mockers." Having rejected God, these people now seek to fortify themselves in their own thinking by corporately mocking what they have already rejected. It is, of course, a defense mechanism whereby one imagines that the more people he can get to scoff at the truth, the safer he is. There is a perverse security in surrounding oneself with people who loudly deride the truth, even though their arguments are unfounded and irrational. This is the talk shows' man-on-the-street democracy of the damned. Truth never has and never will be determined by the majority—especially a majority of mockers in a television studio. Geraldo and Oprah carry no weight with God.

Scoffers move farther and farther from God and ultimately past consistent moral feeling and become confirmed in their misery and neuroses. Ultimately the postures of decline leave the victim in an enervating moral entropy: walking—standing—sitting—settled damnation.

So much for the Psalmist's psychology of sinful descent. Except that we must say that if any of us caught in any of the three postures (walking, standing, even scoffing), and sense our need, deliverance can come in the twinkling of an eye if we humbly throw ourselves on the grace of God.

But back to the central application of this opening verse, which is this: if we are to be blessed by God, then some of our life must be lived in the negative. If we are to be blessed, there are things we do not do, and do not approve of.

Blessedness is rooted in a divinely prescribed negative.

If this doesn't sound "right" it is because we are unaccustomed to describing blessing and its happiness with prohibitions. Our twentieth-century culture can't conceive of blessing in the negative. Blessing, it thinks, cannot consist of "no's" and "don'ts" and prohibitions and caveats. Happiness, by cultural definition, is unbridled freedom.

Now when we say that obtaining blessing is to a great extent a negative pursuit, we do not mean that blessing comes from being negative. Negative attitudes retard the kingdom of God. Spirit-filled Christians are not negative, but they will take negative positions.

Therefore being "blessed" in God's eyes involves negation. There are things which we do not do. Things which have to do with personal ethics: what we see, where we go, what we support. There are things which we take positions against: abortion, heterosexual fornication and adultery, homosexuality, materialism, financial exploitation, and pornography, for example.

Here I think contemporary Christianity is in great danger because whereas it used to be associated with the things it didn't do or approve of, today it easily takes its place with the consensus—and that is a very comfortable place. No one wants to be "negative" or called "unloving" or "narrow" (the very worst of all epithets!). Call me stupid. Call me a jerk if you will. Anything! But please don't call me "narrow." I'm certainly not suggesting a return to legalism and a life of negation.

But we must remember that Christ Himself was "negative," and that the Ten Commandments are phrased in the negative, and that Joseph and Daniel were no doubt called "narrow" and "negative" in their day. If we do not have a strong hatred for bad, we will not have much love for good. And we certainly will not be what God calls "blessed."

The Road to Take

So there are things which a blessed person does not do. But if he is "blessed," he also must engage in the positive, which is described in verse 2: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night."

He is positively to "delight ... in the law (literally the Torah) of the Lord." Torah means "instruction," and thus it includes other more general parts of God's revelation. As Leupold says, it is closely synonymous with the "Word of God."² To us it means that the blessed man or woman, in contrast to culture, delights in God's Word.

What about the meaning of "delight"? It is found in the full sense of "on His law he meditates day and night." "Meditates" carries the idea of an audible murmur.³ This fits well with the fact that no one in biblical times ever read silently.⁴ No one ever knew that it was possible. In later history, the first men to read silently were regarded with wonder.

The picture is of a man reading and rereading out loud from God's Word. St. Augustine in his translation translates "meditate" memorably with the word "chatter"—so we further see a man chattering the word in reading and conversation with God.⁵ This is what David did as he delighted in God's word—though his Bible was not one-fourth of what ours is, and did not ascend to the sublime revelation of the New Testament. We should have ten times more delight than he!

Martin Luther said that "'meditate day and night' means at all times, or incessantly, since day and night comprise all of time." Then he adds, "time is divided not only into day and night, but ... also into good times and bad times. Thus the day is the time of prosperity, while night is the time of adversity."⁶ The blessed person meditates on God's Word all the time.

This, by the way, is one of the foundational secrets of

usability. The life of Joshua, the ultimate activist, was grounded in scriptural meditation as God directed him:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law My servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it (Josh. 1:7-8).

This was the foundation of Martin Luther's life. Scholars are amazed at how he had almost the entire Vulgate memorized, as well as the Greek New Testament.

Dr. Harry Ironside, the celebrated pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, was a man of little formal education but possessed great power in ministry. By the age of 14 he had read the entire Bible through 14 times. He oozed Scripture.⁷

It was the same with Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, the famous minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, who became one of the most powerful preachers of his era. His wife writes of him:

Someone once asked him how long it had taken him to prepare a certain sermon. His answer was, "Thirty years and thirty minutes." He had immersed himself in the Bible from the time he was fifteen years old, when he had memorized the Book of Philippians a verse a day until he knew the entire book by heart, then went on to other passages. He felt it was not enough to learn by rote—it had to be by heart, because you loved and believed it. He never did commit the entire Bible to memory, but he was thoroughly familiar with all of it. Everything he read—the newspaper, a magazine, a book—he read in the light of what the Bible teaches, gearing his thinking to eternity and God's over-all plan, rather than to time.⁸

Charles Spurgeon said it well, I think, when he commented, "A Bible which is falling apart usually belongs to

someone who is not."

Our test sets up an antithesis between those who take "the counsel of the wicked" or "the counsel of God" by meditating on His Word. We either fill ourselves with the philosophy of the world or the philosophy of God. In respect to this fact there is an inexplicable dictum which has become a dominant refrain in my spiritual thinking. It is this: *You cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know.* If you don't know God's Word, its influence in your life will be minimal. In a certain sense it comes down to programming. The advice of Psalm one, taken to heart, will change a believer's life. This beatitude, "Blessed is the man . . . [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord," should be heard by all of us. If you don't take time to read and meditate, you should!

Busyness is no excuse. If you think so, consider the example of Nelson Bell, the father of Ruth Bell Graham. Bell was not a seminary grad. He was a medical doctor, the sole physician in a 400-bed hospital in China. Billy Graham says that his medical missionary father-in-law, Nelson Bell, made it a point "to rise every morning at four-thirty and spend two to three hours in Bible reading. He didn't use that time to read commentaries or write; he didn't do his correspondence or any of his other work. He just read the Scriptures every morning, and he was a walking Bible encyclopedia. People wondered at the holiness and the greatness in his life."⁹

Or consider the case of Lt. General William K. Harrison, the most decorated soldier in the 30th Infantry Division, rated by General Eisenhower as the number-one infantry division in World War II. General Harrison was the first American to enter Belgium at the head of the Allied forces. He received every decoration for valor except the Congressional Medal of Honor—being honored with the Distinguished Silver Cross, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for

Valor, and the Purple Heart (he was one of the few generals to be wounded in action). When the Korean War began, he served as Chief of Staff in the United Nations Command—and because of his character and self-control was ultimately President Eisenhower’s choice to head the long and tedious negotiations to end the war.

General Harrison was a soldier’s soldier who led a very busy, ultra-kinetic life, but he was also an amazing man of the Word. When he was a twenty-year-old West Point Cadet, he began reading the Old Testament through once a year and the New Testament four times. General Harrison did this until the end of his life. Even in the thick of war he maintained his commitment by catching up during the two-and-three-day respites for replacement which followed battles, so that when the war ended he was right on schedule.

When at the age of ninety his failing eyesight no longer permitted his discipline, he had read the Old Testament 70 times and the New testament 280 times! No wonder his godliness and wisdom were proverbial, and that the Lord used him for eighteen fruitful years to lead Officers Christian Fellowship.¹⁰

If you are a college or graduate student you are living through some very formative times in your life. You are studying many of the great works of Western civilization. Don’t forget that the greatest work of them all is the Bible. Read it through every year. The busiest person and the housewife all have the same call. Read the Word. Meditate on the truths of God’s book.

All of this is doubly true for preachers of the Word. We need to immerse ourselves in it much like General Harrison. We need to live in our English Bibles. When we get cut, we ought to bleed Bible. Our blood, to use the phrase of C. H. Spurgeon, ought to be “bibline.”

How? Well, to begin with, “Five pages a day puts the Bible

away.” It’s that simple. There’s also the *One Year Bible*, the modern equivalent to the ancient breviary. There is even a *One Year New Testament*. Years ago Robert Murray McCheyne put together a calendar of readings by which one can read the Old Testament once, and the New Testament and Psalms twice annually. Other plans can be found in a number of places.

The Blessing

The blessing is described in verse 3: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”

This is the centerpiece of this magnificent Psalm. The picture this verse conjures in my mind is, I know, not accurate, because grapefruit trees were not present in the Psalmist’s Palestine. But that is what I see. The reason is because when I was a college pastor in Los Angeles we took our college group to Palm Springs for a Christmas vacation retreat, and one of the men in the local church invited us to his estate which featured grapefruit trees by the pool. And they were unbelievable. Each tree had a perfect trunk. And each tree was a perfect manicured ball. And each leaf glistened as if it had been polished (we thought maybe the gardener actually did it!), and each of the trees was covered with perfect grapefruit like so many yellow Christmas bulbs. The reason for this, of course, was that the desert provided sunlight 300 days a year, and the owner, by modern irrigation, provided streams of water.

My image of this flourishing tree was monumental to the ancient oriental mind because of the uniform dryness of the climate. The Psalmist is so enthusiastic about his simile that he changes to a direct description of the man in the final line, “Whatever he does prospers.”

Is he talking primarily about wealth as so many have

interpreted this? No, this is not a vulgar promise of materialistic prosperity. Rather, it means a rich, full life. It means blessing. The promise means this: Good days may come (and they will), bad days may come (and they surely will), but whatever they are, we will be blessed, we will prosper.

Literally, the Hebrew says, "O, the blessedness of the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly...but his delight is in the law of the Lord." It is the plural of intensity. "How blessed he will be!"

The secret of blessedness is where the tree is planted, because where a tree is rooted makes all the difference in the world. If it is by the stream of God's Word, it "yields its fruit in season and its leaf does not wither." If it is in the wasteland of the world it will shrivel and wither. As the ad says, "It's the water."

How about it? Are you watered? Apples growing on branches lead us to the conclusion that the branches are those of an apple tree. The fruit of the Spirit leads to the conclusion that we are rooted in the Spirit. How is it?

The Road to Doom

Now briefly, a chill note from the Psalmist describes the path of doom. The beautiful simile of the tree is followed by a simile which suggests obliteration. "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."

We would expect the Psalmist to follow the believer's simile of the flourishing with the simile of a withered shrub for unbelievers, but the contrast is even more terrible—so he uses chaff. When grain is winnowed at harvest time, it is tossed in the air so that the chaff is blown away by the breeze. Chaff is light and useless, of no substance. This is how it is for the wicked. In the final judgment they are blown away. It is a dread picture of doom.

This means that a believer's joy is always tempered by pain. Blessedness on earth is never free from sorrow. *Joy and woe, are woven fine, A mantle for the soul divine.*

Blessedness Means Obligation. The Psalm is summed up in verse 6: "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." That He "knows" the righteous means far more than that He is informed about them. It means that He is interested and cares.¹¹ It suggests relationship. This assurance is conducive to blessedness.

What a thought! He knows, He cares, He is in control as He leads the righteous to heaven. He numbers the hairs on their heads.

To the wicked He says, "I don't know you" (Matt. 25:12). It is a dread contrast.

The path of blessing? How can we be blessed for the duration of our lives? First, by being willing to be negative about life. There are things which we must covenant not to approve of or participate in. We must refuse the "counsel of the wicked." In fact, we must contradict it. We must be real men and women regardless of what those around us may say. We must be willing even to be the brunt of "scoffers" who might call us "narrow" and "unloving."

Second, we must "delight" in the law of the Lord and "meditate" on it day and night. It involves a choice, a resolution. And in this respect, I am aware that there is nothing I as a minister can do. Only you, by the grace and power of God, can bring the change that is needed.

Pray that this happens. For then you "will be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (v. 3).

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End Notes

- 1 Stuart Briscoe, *What Works When Life Doesn't* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books), 11-12.
- 2 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 35.
- 3 M. H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 63.
- 4 Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939).
- 5 C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1869), 6.
- 6 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 10 (St. Louis: Concordia), 17.
- 7 Warren W. Wiersbe, *Listening to the Giants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 198.
- 8 Margaret N. Barnhouse, *That Man Barnhouse* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1983), 250-51.
- 9 This was said by Billy Graham at the Congress on Discipleship and Evangelism (CODE '76), a gathering of fifteen hundred young people during the Greater San Diego Billy Graham Crusade, August 1976.
- 10 Personal correspondence with retired Air Force Colonel William Waldrop, February 1991.
- 11 Op. cit., Leupold, 38.