

“Two Ways To Live”

9 August 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship: Heidelberg Catechism Q1 & Q2

Hymn of Preparation: His Mercy Is More

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Judy Slovak

Reading: Psalm 1

Sermon:

Going against the flow. This picture [one fish swimming in the opposite direction of the other fish] speaks to me because it was the theme of a week of outreach I was involved in when a student. The team all had t-shirts with this design. I was taken by it, have remembered it but if I am honest, I did not fully realise in the idealism of youth how significant the reality would be and how difficult life can be swimming against the tide of public opinion. As I was on holidays I had time to watch the funeral of John Hume and it struck me as I listened to the commentary how difficult his life was - the criticism, the setbacks, the forces of state, the forces of evil - and how single minded and determined he had to be as he pursued the worthy goal of peace in Northern Ireland.

Any who have been cognisant of the changes in our society over the years will be able to understand the reality of the picture of swimming against the flow for those who are followers of Jesus Christ. Sometimes in a more general sense we are aware that this world is so far removed from the true ideals of the Christian life, that we wonder how we can survive and flourish in such a broken and devastated world. My heart goes out to those who are going to university this year, the description of what you will not be allowed to do because of COVID-19 is very restrictive and far removed from what your experience should be, highlighting again the deep disruption the virulent Covid Novo-Virus has visited upon us. How can we find help to live in a world that isn't working for us, that is opposed to us at times, how can we live well?

Psalm 1 stands at the head of a collection of Hebrew poetry songs which gives us help in a variety of ways, helping us express our emotions, helping us pray, lament, rejoice, question and in this psalm, wisdom is given on how to choose and navigate life, so that we will prosper and reach our destination of heaven and avoid perishing with the wicked. It is vitally important and terribly significant that we heed its wisdom. It describes the way to blessing. It also describes a way of destruction, of not being part of the righteous. It is a matter of extreme importance because it outlines two ways to live and these two ways have two destinations.

Jesus used this illustration to say what Psalm 1 says, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”* (Matthew 7:13-14)

(Indebted to Dale Ralph Davis' commentary for headings)

I. The direction of a believer's life (v1-2)

It is interesting that blessing comes from not doing something, it starts negatively. A believer does not walk according to the advice of the wicked, follow the lifestyle of the sinner or participate with those openly opposed to God. Who are the wicked, sinners, mockers? They are strong words/descriptions the Bible applies to people, people who do NOT have a relationship with God. They are anyone who does not acknowledge God as Lord, who does not recognise Him. They can be indifferent or hostile, but at heart they reject Him and do not follow Him. WE understand this, because in our nature that was the way we were, each of us has turned to our own way, (Is 53:6) our thoughts and ways were not His (Is 55:8) and we recognise the reality of hearts that reject God and His ways. Such are called wicked, sinners and mockers.

However, this really is mostly not overt, blatant, undisguised evil but subtle and persuasive, indeed deceitful, in its pressure: *be part of us, don't stand out, be happy, be part of the gang, be cool, sure everyone is there, why not join us?*

Blessing comes to the person who is careful to NOT follow their ways. This has to be carefully worked out. The blessed life is one where we are informed but careful, gracious but firm, determined and clear. It is going to be negative if we don't do what v.2 tells us to do and hopefully we are asking the question, "How will I be able to discern and have the ability to NOT follow the ways of those who do not acknowledge God as Lord?" **Answer: By delighting in God and His instruction. (v2)**

We have an Alexa which works well, but I struggle to know how to address "her". . . it. Do I use the word please or not? I literally tell myself "she" is not personal. But God *is* personal. In v.2 our Bibles put God's name in capitals - LORD. It translates the personal name of God - *Yahweh*. How do you NOT follow the way of those who are not God's people? You do so by delighting in a personal God and following His ways.

We counteract the pressure of peers by a deep love for God in Jesus Christ, by a relationship that actively seeks to know and follow what pleases Him. Only one man did this perfectly and that was Jesus Christ. He rose early, He knew the scriptures, He spent time praying, He spoke boldly, He was not worldly at all, He loved people, He gave Himself to them. His life was the most attractive life ever lived and we have to fight against the lies of Satan who says exactly the opposite, because when we read v.2, we tend to think, *even as believers*, that it sounds dull and certainly not delightful. Therefore, the direction of the one blessed is toward God. It means walking in the counsel of God, it means standing and sitting with the righteous who love Him and His word.

I have just recently read the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Daniel lived at a difficult time, exiled from all he knew in Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but he knew God and had a strong prayerful relationship with God. For Daniel and his friends, being blessed did not mean withdrawing from the world but it did mean they said NO to those things that dishonoured God, they went against the flow. YES they were criticised, became a source of resentment and envy and faced death in their stance for God, but they knew the blessing of God. The direction of a believer's life is towards God and His word and that will inevitably mean we swim against the flow of the world in some issues.

II. The description of a believer's life (v3-4)

They say a picture paints a thousand words so here is the picture. An evergreen tree planted by water contrasted with chaff. The metaphor is of a life, a person who is stable (planted), has vitality (by streams of water), is productive (yields its fruit), durable (its leaf does not wither). "Prosper" provides a summary statement, based on the idea of flourishing. It is much broader than material prosperity affecting the whole of life in Jewish thought. If you are tempted to think materially, then Jesus' life is the corrective. He owned no house, had no riches, yet the value of His life and ministry are incalculable.

This idea has become more precious to me. I confess I am a Christian (and perhaps you are too) who likes things to work out well, who values an easy life, who is only beginning to learn that circumstances, though important, do not ultimately determine how we develop in life. What does, what is vital, is our connection to God, our faith, and the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence? Jesus again used the picture of water, water within, to teach us of the reality of His presence, *"Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring or water welling up to eternal life"* (John 4:14). All of this is captured by the picture of the evergreen tree whose roots reach to the water.

Verse 3 gives us a series of promises for life in relationship with God which are really staggering and encouraging: fruitful, long lasting, prospering in life whatever the circumstances. Psalm 1 stands as an entry into songs about life in every variety and they are about seeking to maintain the connection with God. The promise of God is that doing so brings stability, vitality, productivity, durability, and prosperity.

To highlight this in a different way, the contrast is with the wicked. They are of little substance, and get blown away and forgotten.

III. The destiny of a believer's life (v5-6)

These verses draw a sober conclusion about the life of the unbeliever. For the unbeliever, there is no justification (they will not stand in the judgement), no communion (they cannot be admitted to the assembly of the righteous) and no hope (they will perish).

The destiny of the believer in Jesus Christ is different. Let us remind ourselves of the gospel. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and humanity is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement (Hebrews 9:27). Jesus is the one who is appointed as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). The gospel as we have recently read in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus: *"but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive, with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus"* (Ephesians Ch 2:4-7)

You see, the destiny of the believer's life is that we will stand in the judgement because of Christ's righteousness and our being in Him, we will sit in the assembly of the righteous because of the imputation of Christ's righteousness and we will not perish because the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23b).

Application.

This psalm stands as number 1 because it is important and vital in these songs of life. It tells us in six short verses that there are two ways to live, considering the reality of God and eternity. It tells us that the life lived in relationship with God is about flourishing. It starts with an acceptance of the gospel and it continues with daily delighting in God, listening to His instruction and following His ways. It is about understanding how we are to live in the world honouring Him. I urge you to face the reality of your life today in relationship with God, understanding what He instructs about every aspect of what you face in your life. Read the Bible expecting Him to speak, pray asking what is real to you, listen to each other, think, discuss, debate. Are you walking with Jesus, are you standing with Christians, are you contributing to your church and society?

Be reassured that the LORD watches over us. In terms we might understand, He is the best coach. The LORD watches over the way of the righteous. So live well, enter into life, do not be afraid, get involved, honour God, seek to be salt and light, speak of your worldview, declare the gospel in word and deed and know the security, the fruitfulness and prosperity of life with Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. This is the only way of blessing.

The life lived in relationship with God is blessed and will flourish; sadly, the life lived without relationship with God will flounder. Let us choose life and flourishing, particularly when the threat of death remains real, and we are promised that we will not perish.

Hymn of Reflection: Speak, O Lord

Prayers for Others: Sam Mawhinney

Closing Praise: Yet Not I But Through Christ In Me

Announcements

Benediction: And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now, and for evermore. Amen.