

The Secret of Blessedness

Psalm 1.

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The thesis of this Psalm is the blessedness of the godly man, in contrast with the certain doom of the sinner whenever the time may come for judgment to be executed. Blessedness is a preferable word to happiness, inasmuch as the former attributes to God who blesses, what the latter word, as used by man, assigns to fortune or chance. Still the word blessed is to be understood as meaning what is usually implied in the word happy. The psalm is thus an answer to the almost universal inquiry of mankind after happiness. It shows us where true happiness — real blessedness — is to be alone found.

Happiness is a positive state of existence; but so truly is this world "a vale of tears," that the idea of happiness most familiar to men's minds is a negative one, and views it as depending on the absence of pain, weariness, disappointment, sorrow. Scripture itself stoops to our weakness in this respect, and represents the future happiness of the saints as partly consisting in entire exemption from every kind of grief. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more: neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat." "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." Again, "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away."

But there are deeper and surer sources of unhappiness than any of the afflictions thus enumerated; the sources, in fact, from which all these afflictions flow. But for sin, not one single sensation of bodily pain, not one moment's mental anguish, would have been experienced by a single member of the human family. Not that present exemption from these effects can be secured by moral and spiritual deliverance from sin, which is the cause. The godly suffer as well as others, and in many respects, more than others; but this prevents not their blessedness. It may and does hinder the perfection of it; but not its reality. In this world of evil, a man without sin would be the greatest sufferer on the earth. Of this we need no other proof than the Man of sorrows, who was "acquainted with griefs." But who doubts His blessedness? It is in Him indeed that we have the only *perfect* instance of the character here described. It is not given as a description of Him, but of any godly man, and, primarily, any godly Israelite. For all the godly partake in reality of Christ's character, though in Him alone has it been perfectly exemplified.

In the description here given of the godly man, his character is viewed first negatively and then positively. The first verse shows him exempt from those deeper sources of unhappiness from which all afflictions have really sprung; while the second reveals the positive secret of his blessedness. As for the first — it is not, "Blessed is the man that feels no pain, sheds no tears, suffers no loss or disappointment." No! "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." We have here a double climax. First, as to the characters named: secondly, as to the attitudes described. The ungodly — sinners — the scornful. Walking — standing — sitting.

"The ungodly" are the least culpable in this climax of evil. Their fault is negative. They know not, love not, fear not God. He is not in all their thoughts. They do not wish to remember Him, or to know His will, or obey His commands. "Without God in the world" is the solemn portraiture of their state. Such people have their counsel — their habits of thought — their grounds of judgment — their principles of conduct. In all these *God has no place*: they are *ungodly*. Blessed in the man that heeds not their counsel, that follows it not. It includes all the maxims of the decent, reputable, but ungodly part of society; persons free from gross vices, but with whom *self* is the master-spring — the main object. Even with their freedom from gross vices, this is the case. They would not for their own credit, frequent a low tavern; but neither would they, and for the same reason, attend a cottage prayer-meeting. It is respectable to go to church, or to a well-cushioned fashionable chapel, and they go there; but it is equally respectable to attend the theatre or concert room, and as it is even more agreeable it is more willingly practised. For these and a hundred other habits and deeds such maxims are pleaded as, "We must do as others do." "What good is there in being singular?" "We must act conformably to our station." "This or that is expected of us." "What harm is there in it?" These are but a small specimen of that which is here termed "the counsel of the ungodly."

"Sinners" add to the ungodliness of the former class, positive ways of evil, wicked habits and pursuits. These differ according to constitution, early education or the lack of it, and a number of influences beside. "Every one hath turned to his own way." One may be a way of violence, another of fraud, and another of intemperance. Blessed is the man who equally abstains from all — who "standeth not in the way of sinners."

"The seat of the scornful" is occupied by the one who has so hardened himself against God as to mock at sin, deride the piety of others, and make a jest of sacred things.

Then, as to the second climax, to be in movement, *walking*, clearly affords more hope of being turned in a right direction, than where evil has been deliberately chosen, and a person *stands* in the way of sinners. But to be *seated*, and that in the scorner's chair — to be at ease — where God, and Christ, and heaven are only named to point a joke or raise a laugh; this is, beyond a doubt, the crowning attainment of such as call evil good, and good evil. Yet not only from this final maturity of shameless vice, but from all the steps which lead on to it, the subject of the psalm abstains. In the scorner's chair he declines to "sit"; in the way of sinners he will not "stand"; in the counsel of the ungodly he refuses to "walk."

Where then does he find the positive secret of his happiness? The psalm informs us, "His delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night." Man must have a positive object, or he cannot be satisfied. He is possessed of an understanding and of affections, for which employment must be found. On the nature of this employment more than on anything besides, does man's happiness depend. Let the understanding be either unoccupied or ill occupied; let the thoughts rove at random, or be fixed on subjects corrupt in themselves, and debasing in their tendencies; let the affections cling to objects in themselves unsatisfying, and which separate from God; or let the affections, directed towards proper objects, be destitute of those objects: how in any case that has been supposed, can the soul be happy? And if the soul be unhappy, mere bodily ease and accommodation serve but as a mockery of its woe. On the other hand let the thoughts be rightly directed and diligently employed: let the affections be in habitual

exercise on their proper, suited objects, and circumstances are of little power to hinder happiness in such a case. Such occupation for both the understanding and the affections is found in the word of God, here called, "the law of the Lord." We must not restrict the expression to the "ten words" spoken on Sinai, or even to the whole law given by Moses. It is used of the entire revelation which God at that time had vouchsafed to man; and as it was in and to the nation of Israel that this revelation had been given, the name of God here used is that of His covenant relation with Israel — "Jehovah." "His delight is in the law of Jehovah." What a number of thoughts are suggested by this statement. We have the idea of authority, for it is a law that is in question, however extended the signification and use of the word. But it is an authority cheerfully acknowledged. His delight is in the law, and how evident it is that the Lord Himself — Jehovah — must be both known and loved, for the heart to find its delight in His law — His word. For us, of course, divine revelation is now much more extended still: it comprises the revelation of God in the person and work of Christ, already come. God has thus made Himself known in a much more personal way than in Old Testament times; so that while the authority of the word is no less absolute, the affections find a personal object to rest upon, much more distinctly manifested, and love takes the place of law. I speak now of the terms by which the whole revelation as known by us may be designated, and of the difference between these and the one here used — "the law of the Lord." But even in the Psalmist's day, how easy the yoke of a law in which his delight was found! His delight was in it. Surely there is no less for us to delight in, now that God is fully revealed, and revealed as Love.

But lovely as is this portraiture of a man whose delight is in Jehovah's law, this is not the whole of what is presented here. "In his law doth he meditate day and night." This is the natural result of delighting in it; and by a happy reaction the result becomes, in its turn, a cause of increased and ever increasing delight. The more we delight in God's word the more habitually shall we meditate therein; and the more we meditate on God's word the more shall we delight therein.

Just as a man's speech or writings is the means or instrument by which he communicates his thoughts, and makes known his feelings, so is God's word the instrument or means by which He makes Himself known. Meditation is the means by which we, on our part, become possessed of that which is made known. In the case of a fellow-creature, suppose I find all my happiness in keeping company with him, listening to his discourse; or, supposing him absent, in reading his letters or writings, poring over their contents, repeating them to myself and following out the trains of thought to which they give rise — clearly, in such a case, it is my delight in the speaker or writer, my admiration of his character or abilities, my sympathy with his thoughts and principles and pursuits, my attachment to himself, which accounts for the delight I have in his writings and discourses. So, if my delight is in the word of God, and if in that word I meditate day and night — my thoughts, whenever released from pressure, returning to God's word and flowing spontaneously in that channel, it is because God Himself is known, loved, and delighted in. If it be, then, the secret of true happiness which is here unfolded to us, what is it but that *God Himself alone suffices for the happiness of his intelligent creature, man?* "Delight thyself also in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." (Psalm 37: 4) "The Lord is my portion, saith my soul." (Lamentations 3: 24) "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." (Psalm 73: 25) "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup." (Psalm 16: 5) Such breathings as these are expressions of the

counsel of the godly. Even as to the means of enjoying Him as our portion, other scriptures are not wanting. "Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever; for they are the rejoicing of my heart." (Psalm 119: 111) "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." (Jeremiah 15: 16) See also Psalm 19: 7-11; and the whole of Psalm 119.

The happiness attendant on the character and course of the godly man is described in verse 3; first under the figure of a tree, and then in literal terms. What a picture does the former part present! "A tree" — one of the loveliest objects in creation — a specimen of living beauty.

"Planted" — not a wildling, growing from seed scattered haphazard by the wind, and alighting anywhere — but *planted*: some skilful eye discerning the suited situation, and some careful hand removing all obstructions to the future growth of the tree thus planted in a generous soil, with every advantage of watchful culture that could be bestowed upon it. "By the rivers of water"; and not dependent, therefore, on the fitful shower, though profiting by it whenever it falls. A river at the roots, this tree is secure from drought. What a lively representation of the man who depends not for happiness or usefulness on any creature supplies, who leans not on an arm of flesh, but trusts in the living God, and finds all his springs in Him. "That bringeth forth his fruit," and "in his season" too. Not like "untimely figs" which the tree casts unripe and unfit for use; but *in his season*, the time when it is expected, having reached maturity, and being fit for every end to which it is adapted. So the godly man — active when in health and vigour, patient and resigned when sickness compels retirement, firm when firmness is required, yielding and submissive when it is for God's glory that he should be so — "*he* bringeth forth his fruit in his season." "His leaf also shall not wither." Instead of any decay in his profession — that which man's eye meets as the leaf in the tree that profession is sustained in ever fresh and changeless vigour and consistency, by the life from which it springs. "And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." Such is the literal statement of the blessing from God which attends the godly man. But this requires a little close attention.

In present result, judged by any human or earthly standard, this statement would not seem to be verified. When we hear the psalmist himself exclaiming, "Thou hast made void the covenant of thy servant, broken down all his hedges, brought his strongholds to ruin, set up the right hand of his adversaries, made all his enemies to rejoice": when we hear him asking, "Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?" (Ps. 89: 39-47): and when we hear Christ Himself saying, "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought and in vain" (Isa. 49: 4; see also Matt. 23: 37) — it is evident that, "whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" is not to be taken as an absolute promise to be fulfilled in every sense, and in every case, and at all times. "What things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law" (Rom. 3: 19). This follows on a number of quotations from the book of Psalms; so that this book would seem to be included in the term "the law." It was Israel to whom "the law" was given, whether in its narrower or wider sense; and we have seen that the name of covenant relation with Israel is the name here used. Now it was part of Jehovah's covenant with Israel, that obedience should be attended with prosperity. "Blessed shalt thou be in the city, in the field, the fruit of thy body, the fruit of thy ground, cattle, kine, and the flocks of thy sheep" (see Deut. 28: 3, 4). The first thirteen verses indeed may be read as an exposition of the words before us, "whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

But then these promises are to the *nation* in case of their obedience. Jehovah's government would secure all this blessedness and prosperity to His nation, if obedient. But the First Psalm treats of a godly man, not an obedient nation; nay, of a godly man, in contrast with the wicked. This, as to character, we have seen in the first two verses, we are to see it shortly in results. But the very presence of the ungodly, and even of scorners, implies a testing time for the faithful; and, as unfolded largely in other Psalms, *the great test is the suspension of this word as to any present fulfilment*, so that instead of the godly man prospering in all he does, it seems as though the wicked were in prosperity and the godly persecuted and forsaken. But this is not brought out here, and where it is, it is only for the present. There is a judgment impending, the effect of which will be to remove the ungodly, and leave only those as the righteous congregation, who, in the presence of the ungodly, and of the trial inseparable therefrom, have sustained the character of the man here described. In other words, *a remnant*, distinguished from the wicked part of the nation, by the character here given as that of an individual godly man, will *become the nation*, when the judgment has swept the ungodly away; and then of each such person it will indeed be true, "whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

"The ungodly are not so": entirely contrasted in character, whatever prosperity they may have for the present, it is short-lived, and they themselves, like "the chaff which the wind driveth away." Think of the difference between the tree planted by the rivers of water, and the chaff which the wind driveth away! It is only till the judgment that the wicked can be supposed to prosper; but that judgment is sure, and "the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." They are mingled together now, however different in character; dwelling in the same city, perhaps under the same roof, sitting at the same table, or sleeping in the same bed. But judgment will distinguish accurately between the one and the other. And mark well, there is no hint here of the translation of saints to heaven, such as we are now taught to expect at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was a mystery never revealed till apostolic times — till redemption had been accomplished, the Holy Ghost had come down, and the earthly people had not only rejected and crucified their Messiah, but rejected the last offers of mercy through His death, by the Holy Ghost come down from heaven. Then, when nothing remained but for sovereign grace to call out from every nation a saved people to be associated with an earth-rejected Christ in His heavenly place and glory, then it was revealed, that He will perfect His work of grace by descending to raise His sleeping, and change His waking, saints — all being caught up together to meet Him in the air, and so be for ever with Him: a translation of the whole body of the saints from earth to heaven, not dependent on any judgment to fall upon the wicked.

This is our hope as Christians; while, on the other hand, the judgment treated of in the first Psalm, and throughout the Psalms, is a judgment by which the wicked are removed, and the righteous left as Jehovah's congregation on the earth. It is the judgment of Luke 17: 24-37, Matt. 24: 37-41, and numerous scriptures besides, in which we read of the wicked being taken, and the righteous left. Meanwhile, "the Lord knoweth" (both discerns and approves) "the way of the righteous"; "but the way of the ungodly" (however seemingly successful now) "shall," in the time of judgment, surely "perish." W. T.