

I. Intro

A. I appreciate the work the musicians have given in providing us with songs for this series – the lead vocalists, the choirs, the song writers, those playing all of the instruments. Every week we will hear a new song that has been written to help us more fully embrace the Psalm we are studying. To help us absorb the truth it is proclaiming. To drive it deeper into our heart.

B. Perhaps you are like me, you can only look on and wonder, “how do they do that?” Brad comes to me and says, “I think we might write 11 songs for this series.” And I think, “How long will that take, 100 years? Because I have been alive for 58 and so far I have written zero songs.”

C. A couple years ago I went to a jazz concert at Northwestern that ended with a jazz pianist and a jazz percussionist meeting for the first time, sitting down and writing a song in front of us – by playing back and forth.

1. It started very weird. The percussionist was using drum sticks on the floor and music stand and the back of a chair. And the pianist had the top of the piano open and was laying inside it shouting. And it was weird in ways only higher ed can be weird. And I thought, this is bad and bizarre.

2. But then, slowly, in this back and forth a song began to emerge – and then they jumped together and were playing together. And the percussionist was moved to the marimba where he was playing harmony and the song built up to this crescendo and they ended together and the place erupted.

3. It was amazing. From this cacophony of noise emerged a real song. I could only look on and wonder – how do they do that.

D. Well, we know. And the answer goes directly to today’s text. The answer is, on the one hand, the ability to create music (or art, or a sermon, or lead a team well), is a gift – from God.

1. That is what “natural talents” are. The gifts are not from nature, they come from the Creator. He is a god of beauty and he gives gifts.

E. On the other hand, the ability to do anything is a reflection of how we have spent our time – of the way we have been formed.

F. I was in Nashville this week at a conference.

1. Q; It’s an annual gathering of academics, journalists, some politicians, business leaders, tech folks, some pastors, some NGO leaders. And it’s a bit like a Christian TED event. Lots of talks – all 9 minutes long.

2. And they spanned the biggest topics: Fake News, immigration, socialism versus capitalism, Artificial Intelligence, gender and sex issues of all types, Millennials and Gen Z, poverty, reconciliation, entrepreneurship, food.

G. And while I was there, the NFL draft was happening at the same time. And I ended up in the elevator with a young guy who I am quite sure was there to be drafted.

1. 6’3”, broad shoulders, narrow waste, no body fat, in expensive sweats.

2. Everything about him said, “I can run faster and jump higher than you. But he had to develop that talent.

H. Some of who we are is a product of things we do not control. I am who I am in part because of things I do not control. But much of who we are is up to us.

I. Over time we become the result of the decisions we make.

1. How we choose to respond to events becomes as important – sometimes more important – than the events.

2. And the things we do over and over, and the things we think the most about, and the things we love, end up shaping us.

3. We become like the things we focus on. We become like the things we love. We make decisions and then those decisions make us.

J. There are paths that lead to the ability to write music. And there are paths that do not. More to the point, there are paths that lead towards godly character - that is blessed; that is peaceful; that has the ability to weather storms and droughts. And there are pathways that lead to destruction.

II. This should not be new information.

A. For starters, it is common sense.

1. We know that our weight varies based on what we eat and how often we exercise. And we know that there are results that emerge from studying for an exam and there are results that emerge from binge watching Netflix instead of studying for finals.

2. There is a certain character that results from focusing on *The Wall Street Journal*, and another character that results from focusing on the Bible. I am not knocking *The Wall Street Journal* – I read it most days. But you get my point.

3. One of the presenters at Q was an author who had just written about all of this. He had spent several years as a missionary overseas, and then come home and gone to law school.

a) And just before graduating from law school he started to have panic attacks and he realized that over the last few years he had been shaped by what he called the Liturgy of Law School.

b) The book he wrote was on the everyday practices he needed to re-introduce into his life to be shaped by faith.

B. Everything that I have said so far has been said many times in many ways

1. It's advice we hear from teachers, coaches and bosses. It is what the poets say: Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.¹

C. And it has been said many times in the Bible

1. The book of Psalms begins by describing two types of people—the righteous and the wicked. Jesus spoke of good and bad trees. He also spoke about a narrow road which, though more difficult and less traveled – led to a good outcome. And a wide, easy road that led to destruction. All of these metaphors imply a choice.

D. And it was said quite eloquently and poetically in Psalm one, which is one of the most famous Psalms.

1. It's an introduction and overview of what follows.

2. And it outlines how to be happy, not just when things are going well – although that is harder than many realize. But even when they are not going well.

III. Let me read Psalm 1

IV. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.

V. V2: But whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

V3: That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

VI. V4: 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.

VII. V6: For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

VIII. Blessed

A. The Hebrew here suggests this term is in all capitals. It's an exclamation. "Oh how blessed." And it's plural. Which suggests a multiplicity of blessings.

IX. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.

A. This is classic Hebrew parallelism. It's just repeating the idea from different angles.

B. A lot of the Bible is poetry. Some say fifty percent of the Old Testament – which seems quite high to me. But this is clearly a poem, so we need to read it like a poem.

C. The goal of interpretation is to figure out what the original writer intended the original reader to understand. That means, you start by understanding the genre, because you interpret them differently.

D. One of the characteristics of Hebrew poems is that they do not rhyme words, they rhyme ideas. That is what we see here. Blessed are those who: 1) avoid the wicked; 2) avoid sinners; and 3) avoid mockers. In other words, life works better when you don't hang out with guys.

X. V2: **But whose delight** – who are drawn to, who think about, who love the law of God.

A. The word delight is a bit surprising. I might have thought he would say "love" but delight sure works.

B. When I was in Nashville there were tens of thousands of people out in the street for the draft announcements. I didn't get that this was a thing. I get being at a game, but not standing in the street for hours to hear the announcement of who your team picked. I do not get it, but it's a pretty good illustration of what it looks like to "delight" in something. (It's also a pretty good illustration of what it looks like to worship something, which in this case is a bad thing. But that's another sermon).

XI. But whose delight is in the law of the Lord

A. Two surprises here that frame what we are being called to. Note that the text does not say, “whose delight is in God.” That is what we are ultimately after. Not to know about God but to know Him. (Of course, that starts with knowing about – if we do not go to the Bible to learn about who God is we just project our views on God. He is like us – thinks and would vote like us – he’s just a bit nicer). We need to study what has been revealed in order to know about first. But I would have thought he would say, “delight is in God.”

B. The second is, it is not advocating making wise decisions, it is advocating loving the right things. We often act – or think that - it’s the smartest person who will get it right. But that is not the point here. The difference between the righteous and the wicked is not what they know but what they love. Psalm 1 recognizes that our affections determine our choices, and our choices determine our destiny. It is the heart, not the head, that guides us through the world. The righteous is not the person who knows a lot about God, but the one who delights in him.²

XII. And who meditates on his law day and night.

A. The first time I was told I was supposed to meditate was in my first class at Trinity. And I was a bit scandalized. For starters, I thought meditation was something for Hindus and Buddhists. I was shocked that I was being told to meditate. Then I read this book and saw how often we are told to meditate, and I was scandalized that no one had ever talked to me about it before.

B. Here we get a call to meditate – and in fact, what we have could be called a meditation on meditation. The Book of Psalms is basically a collection of prayers. There are lots of different types of Psalms: praise, messianic, lament, imprecatory. But with a few exceptions, they are prayers. Very honest, sometimes raw - this is one of the places people are shocked. But ironically, Psalm one, which sets it up, is not a prayer and it does not mention prayer. It is a meditation. And this is because meditation is key to prayer.

XIII. Let me call a time out here to explain meditation for a minute. You need to understand a few things about it. Mostly how Christian meditation and Eastern meditation differ.

A. For starters, while the goal in Eastern meditation is generally to be quiet or empty your mind; the goal of Christian meditation is to focus it.

1. Now, neither side likes what I have said. Those who advocate eastern meditation will talk about the need to empty your mind so you can focus it. Those arguing for Christian mediation will talk about the need to seek silence and settle before you focus.

2. And the quieting part has become a bigger part of my life over the last couple years. I start my day with a brief prayer. Then I turn to the Psalms. Follow that with a chapter of the Gospels. And then I move into silence. (Muddy Water).

3. I then do some additional reading, trying to find something to really dig into – to meditate on, which biblically speaking means to ponder, to dissect, to unpack. And which is where the East and West seem the most apart. So, I want to acknowledge that Western meditation includes quieting and eastern includes focusing, but I think they are different on this point.

B. A second way they differ is that Eastern meditation is more focused on intuition, while Christian meditation is more focused on rationality.³

1. The East is about seeing the whole at once and Christian meditation is about breaking it down so you can get to a specific truth that you can focus on.

2. Eastern meditation attempts to empty the mind of rationality in order to see the big picture and be intuitive. Biblical meditation is about breaking down Scripture and thinking about aspects of it. Then you try to inflame your intuition with what you just learned.

C. I think another way in which they are different is that the goal of biblical meditation is not necessarily to be more settled. Let me give you two examples:

1. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah has meditational experience on the holiness of God. And it doesn't leave him calm and delighted. It leaves him horrified.

2. In the Sermon on the Mount, we get Jesus meditation on the Ten Commandments. He unpacks them. "You've heard it said..., but I...". In other words, lets think more deeply about this." And when he is done, we are not delighted. It's horrible and overwhelming. We think, "don't kill." OK, I haven't. Don't commit adultery. OK. I'm doing pretty well right now. Then we get Jesus's meditation on them and we are slammed. We are sunk when we really look at the Law.

D. So, the first thing to hear about meditation is that it's Christian meditation not Eastern – and though they are related they are unique. There are a few other things to understand about meditation:

1. It's hard. We tend to go for fun and light – we go for amusement – not deep thinking. And there is a time and place for fun and light, but it works as dessert.

2. It's necessary. Our beliefs do not automatically turn into Christian character. They need to be worked into us through spiritual disciplines. We tend to grow through trials – those we bring on ourselves, like fasting and meditation and serving. Or through trials God allows to come our way in this broken world.

3. It's a bridge. Meditation helps drive what we study deeper into our heart. Which changes what we pray for. Unless you meditate before you pray, you often get shallow prayers. Meditation is the bridge between Bible Study and prayer.⁴

XIV. V3: That person is like a tree planted by streams of water. Which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

A. Lots of references to trees in the Bible. Lots of botanical references actually.

B. Note two things here:

1. First, the big idea – those who meditate and put down their roots into Scripture are set to survive harsh conditions, because even when life is hard (and the stream is dried up) they will thrive. Someone who has put their roots down in God and His Word has an ability to weather bad weather.

2. Second, these trees have been planted there. It's not by accident. In fact, the Hebrew term is more often transplanted than simply planted – which is the Gospel. To get taken out of one setting – that is not going to work out – and to be placed somewhere that will lead to life

XV. Vs. 4: **Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.**

- A. Chaff is the wispy, papery kernel around the wheat. It's good for nothing. And it weighs next to nothing, so if you throw wheat into the air, the chaff blows down wind.
- B. So, chaff is the opposite of a tree that has been planted by a stream. It has no root or substance. It gets blown away by a light wind.

XVI. V5: **Therefore the wicked will not stand (withstand) in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.**

- A. This is quite politically incorrect. The very binary nature of this stands in stark contrast to the spirit of this age, in which anything goes.

XVII. V6: **For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.**

- A. Please note: the wicked set themselves on a path that ends poorly. So often people think of sin as something arbitrary that God will punish, as opposed to God saying: if you go down that path it leads to trouble. Don't go on that path. It doesn't lead where you want to go. Sin is ultimately stupid and self-destructive behavior. If we saw what it does to us we'd be more likely to lick a hot stove than to sin.

XVIII. A few final observations as I close.

- A. So far I have noted three things:
1. We are on a path, and it will take us to a pretty predictable place. It suggests that we are making lots of decisions and those decisions will turn around and make us. Which is not a surprise. A while back I talked about my 40th HS Reunion, noting that the biggest surprise was how few surprises there were.
 2. It suggests that we need to study the Word of God and drive it deep into our heart. This Psalm is nothing if it's not a statement about the importance of the Word of God.
 3. It suggests that what separates the righteous and wicked isn't their intelligence but what they love.
- B. There are a few other things to note here: for starters, one of the main ways to learn how to pray is to be immersed in the Psalms.
1. This is what Jesus did. This is what Benedict did in setting up monastery – he had his monks sing through the Psalms every week. The Book of Common prayer takes you through them every month. Calvin had people sing through the Psalms 2x per year
 2. The reason is, the Psalms teach us to pray, and they cover all the situations. They are real – and raw – and they cover every situation, from adoration to lament, from anger to doubt.
- C. The Way All True Prayer Ends in Praise – which is what we get with the last Psalm. If meditation gets you into prayer. All prayer will end in praise
- D. Finally, let's note that Psalm 1 points us to Christ
1. Who is it that delights in the Law of God? Jesus. He is the only one who actually got it right. In Hebrews 10:9 we find him saying. "Here I am, I have come to do your will, which is almost a quote from Psalm 1.

2. How does this help me? On cross he cites Ps. 22. He had whole thing in mind. I am poured out like water, my strength is dried up, you lay me in the dust of death. On the cross Jesus becomes chaff, dust in the wind. He got what we deserve b/c none of us delight in the Law of God. We do not want God to tell us what to do.
3. Jesus does what we needed to have done so we do not blow away
4. If we see that the Law of God is actually about Jesus. Then when you meditate on the Law and know that we have been saved by Christ, then you can delight.
5. When you realize that the Bible points to Christ, then we can lean into the grace of God and we find the streams of water underground that we can tap into.
6. Jesus is the ultimate meditation of God. It is the Word brought to life.

¹ We have a similar thing in opening of Dante's Divine Comedy. Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

² This last paragraph is a quote from Skye Jethani, as is this: In our modern context which exalts the intellect, we assume that knowledge is the necessary ingredient to solve any problem and make every decision. The assumption made by many Christian communities is that merely teaching God's law will result in people following it. While knowledge matters, there is a more foundational element that is often overlooked. James K. A. Smith asks it this way, "What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?"

³ Thanks to Tim Keller for this insight.

⁴ Richard Baxter: Meditation is distinguished from the study of the word wherein the principle aim is to learn the truth. And it is also distinguished from prayer in which God himself is the immediate object. Meditation is the effecting of our own hearts and minds with love, delight and humility toward the things contained in the word.