

The Key To Life

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me now back to the passage that we read in the book of Psalms, Psalms 1 and 2. We're going to be looking at this passage tonight. And I have four questions.

I want us to consider these four questions. And the answers to these questions, they'll build one upon the other. And I think they'll help us to come to an understanding of what God is saying to us in his word.

So the first question that I want to set before you as we come to these Psalms this evening is why bother with ancient poems? These two Psalms, it's poetry.

They're maybe 3,000 years old. And there are many, many contemporary issues that we face. So there is war in Europe.

There's war in the Middle East. There are problems closer to home. There's a cost of living crisis. You all will have your own concerns in your own local communities.

[1 : 02] All of these really urgent, pressing questions. And we're gathering here tonight to look at two 3,000-year-old poems. And someone may well ask you, why on earth would you do that?

Well, we could. The simple answer would be to say, well, it's God's word. And that would be answer enough. There's two more specific things that we can say as we look at these Psalms. So first of all, these Psalms, these poems, are the key to the Psalter.

They're the key to understanding everything that comes after them. If you were to look later on at the end of the book of Psalms, for example, in Psalm 144, if you were to look that up, Psalm 144, verse 15, notice it says, blessed are the people to whom such blessings fall.

And that language of blessedness, that might sound familiar, yes? Because that's how the book begins. Blessed is the man in Psalm 1, verse 1.

In Psalm 2, verse 12, blessed are all who take refuge in him. This idea of blessedness is introduced to us at the beginning of the Psalms, and we see it there again at the end in Psalm 144.

[2 : 18] If you were to look further still in the second to last Psalm, Psalm 149, verses 6 to 9. Let the high praises of God be in their throats, a two-edged sword in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment that is written.

If you were to turn back to Psalm 2, you would recognize that that is very much the language of Psalm 2. The ideas that are introduced at the beginning of the Psalter are picked up at the end of the book.

As a counterexample, there's one here. I didn't know there'd be one here. Hopefully. Well, that's perfect.

In a hymnal, very often, and this one appears to be organized this way, often in a hymnal, hymns will be organized alphabetically. And the point of me mentioning that is if they're just put in alphabetical order, that's a kind of randomness, isn't it?

If you were wanting to understand hymn number 330, you wouldn't particularly look at hymn 331, because those are only next to each other, because alphabetically they're close to each other.

[3 : 43] But in terms of their composition, they don't have anything to do with each other.

Sometimes, I think, as Christians, we approach the Psalms like that, as if it's just a random collection of 150 songs.

But the point that I want to make to you this evening is that there's lots and lots of evidence that compels us to recognize that the Psalms, the Psalter, isn't just a random collection of Psalms. There's a reason for these particular books and for the particular Psalms and the particular order that they're in. And if you're reading a book that's intentionally ordered, the beginning is essential.

If you want to understand what comes after it, you need to understand the beginning. And so Psalms 1 and 2, as the introduction to the book, they're the key to understanding everything that comes after it.

Now, for most of you, maybe all of you here this evening, perhaps you would say, well, yes, I'd like to understand the Psalter. And so you're concerned about the beginning of it.

[4 : 46] Maybe there's no one here like this this evening. Perhaps there is. I don't know you. But you can all imagine people who might agree with that. And they'd say, well, that's fine. That's fine that the Psalms, or the Psalms 1 and 2, are the key to the Psalter.

But I don't really care what the Psalter says. So I don't really care about Psalms 1 and 2. And most of us would object to that kind of attitude. But in answer to that, there's more that we can say. It's not merely that these two Psalms are the key to the Psalter. These two Psalms are the key to life. Do you notice how Psalm 1 begins?

Blessed is the man. This poem is claiming, at least, to offer you blessing, the key to blessing. Sometimes people suggest that that word, blessed, it could be translated happy. I'm not sure that I think that's the best way to translate it. Maybe it's just because I'm too much of a misery gods.

[5 : 50] But happy doesn't really seem to convey enough. But if not happiness, all of us, I think, would say that we want to know a life that's meaningful.

We want to know a life that has purpose and joy and love. We want to know divine approval. We recognize that there's a God who created us. And we want to know that that God looks favorably upon us.

But how can you know that? As another counterexample, there's a line in Shakespeare's Macbeth. One of the characters said, Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.

It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. No one wants that. No one wants to think that their life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. We want significance. We want meaning and joy and happiness and approval. Approval from other people, most of all, approval from God. If these psalms at least claim to offer that, then surely they're worth our attention.

[7 : 10] Why bother in the midst of many pressing issues? Why bother with 3,000-year-old poems? Well, because they're the key to the Psalter. But more than that, because they're the key to life.

We can ask you a second question. Why bother with two ancient poems? We're looking at Psalms 1 and 2. It's the end of a week, or I suppose the start of a new week, but you're just finishing a previous week.

It's the end of the day. Maybe you're tired. And maybe, if you're honest, you're thinking, one psalm would have been enough. He could have just preached on one psalm. Why is he preaching on two psalms?

There's lots in these psalms that we can look at, and we're not going to try exhaustively to look at everything. But there's very good reason why we would want to begin by looking at both of these psalms together.

Now, at first, that might not seem plausible, because they're very different, aren't they? If you read them, they're very different kinds of poems. The first one, people would typically describe it as a wisdom psalm.

[8 : 19] There's the language of blessing. It describes two different paths. There's a choice to be made. There's two groups of people, righteous and wicked. You'll notice that it's written very generically, if that makes sense.

Every man, blessed is the person who does these things. It seems generic in a sense, applicable potentially to everyone. We'll come back to that. But it's a wisdom psalm.

The second one's very different, isn't it? It's a royal psalm. It's all about God and his king. So initially, they may not seem like they go together.

But notice a number of things that do draw these psalms together. You'll notice that, well, ignoring the black font in the ESV, you'll notice that these psalms don't have their own titles.

They have titles that were given to them by the translators. But if you compare psalms 1 and 2 to psalm 3, psalm 3 comes with a title.

[9 : 23] A psalm of David when he fled from Absalom, his son. Psalm 4 comes with a title. To the choir master with stringed instruments, a psalm of David. Psalm 5.

I won't carry on. But the psalter is divided into five books. And in the first book, every single psalm there has a title. If you were skeptical and you were to check that, there are two exceptions. But there are exceptions that can be explained. Every psalm in the first book has its own title. Psalms 1 and 2 don't have titles. In that sense, they stand apart from everything that comes after them.

You'll notice in Psalm 1, in verse 2, it says that on his law he meditates day and night.

People, especially modern people, might have different notions about what meditation involves. The meditation that's involved in the Bible is a reflection upon God's word.

[10:28] And the word that's translated here as meditate actually means to mutter. And the idea is that they're muttering and whispering because their meditation is reciting God's word.

If you look down at Psalm 2, do you notice it says, why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? That word for plotting, it's actually the same word because those people are muttering too.

But they're not muttering, they're not reciting God's word, they're muttering that their secret plans against God's anointed king. My point here is just that both of these words, they use similar words that are sort of plays on words that connect them even in contrast.

Building on that, we see that both of these psalms, however much they're different, they have the same contrast in view. Psalm 1 is all about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

And Psalm 2 is again all about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. And following on from that is another feature that draws these psalms together.

[11:41] They both end with final judgment. In verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 1, 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.

And then Psalm 2 ends, kiss the son lest he be angry and you perish in the way. Again, it's the same words.

Do you notice those words way and perish? In Psalm 2, it's the same words way and perish in Psalm 1. The same themes run through both of these psalms.

They both conclude with final judgment. And then notice also this feature which I've already mentioned. They begin and they end the same way. Blessed is the man and blessed are all who take refuge in him.

There are lots and lots of things that the authors of these psalms and the editors of the Psalter did to tell us that you should understand both of these psalms together. It's like stereoscopic vision.

[12:55] We have vision from two eyes, right? And because you're looking at things with two eyes from the same thing, from slightly different perspectives, it gives you a richer perspective, doesn't it?

If you were to close one eye, you can still see, but you don't have as much depth perception as you do if you have both eyes open. If we read both of these psalms together, it gives us a better perspective.

It gives us a richer understanding. We understand Psalm 1 in light of Psalm 2, and we understand Psalm 2 in light of Psalm 1. So we've thought about why bother with ancient poetry.

Not merely is this poetry God's word, which is answer enough. It's the key to the Psalter. It's the key to life. Why bother with both of these psalms this evening?

Well, because we need to understand them together. There is a third question that we could ask.

What is blessedness? If blessing is so important, if these psalms begin and end with blessing, that's doing a couple of things, yes?

[14:04] The author is using that to tell us we should take the two of them together, but he's also telling us this is a big theme of these books, blessing and how you can have it.

So if blessing is so important, it's important that we understand what it means. And one way that we can do that is to look at another place where the term is used. In Proverbs 8, we read, it's verses 34 to 36, blessed are those, that's the same expression, yes, blessed are those who listen to me watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.

There's a personification of wisdom, and wisdom is pronouncing blessing on all who listen to her.

And then wisdom goes on to say why. This is why they're blessed.

For those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves. All who hate me love death.

Do you notice the contrast? It's the difference between life and death. It's the starkest contrast you could possibly imagine. And blessing relates to life.

[15:24] More specifically, that there's actually two things. The personification of wisdom says, blessed are those who listen, and then we see that they're blessed because, or that their blessing consists in receiving life and God's favor.

Those two things go together, don't they? People ultimately have life because they have the favor of God. And coming back to the Psalms, we see those things here, don't we?

Life and favor. We see the favor of God in Psalms 1 and 2. It's implied in verse 3, isn't it? It's portrayed in a picture there.

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. That's a figurative description of God's favor.

It's seen in verse 6, for the Lord knows the way of the righteous. It's seen in Psalm 2, in verse 6, he says, as for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.

[16:33] God favors his king. His favor rests upon his king. In verse 8, he says to his king, ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.

God's favor upon his king is demonstrated in the extent of his dominion. We see God's favor in these Psalms, and knowing God's favor is essential for you.

Each one of you was made by God. That's why each one of you has inherent dignity and value. And on one level, every human being has an awareness of this God.

And we have a sense that there is an infinite personality. There is something, someone, beyond us. Knowing the favor of that someone is the most important thing.

And if you look at the language that this psalm actually uses in verse 6, it's quite striking, isn't it?

The most important thing for you isn't merely to know that there is a God. We speak in favor of knowing God, but based on this psalm, we could say that really the most important thing for you isn't merely to know God.

[17:51] The most important thing for you is to know that God knows you. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous. Now, we know from the Bible that God knows all things.

There's nothing that God doesn't know. So when it talks about God knowing people, it means that God is acknowledging them. God is saying, He belongs to me.

She's mine. Isn't that a staggering thought, to think that there is a God who knows you, who owns you, and says, You are my people.

Now, we need to be careful and to say that that doesn't mean that everything in our lives goes smoothly. That's implied in the imagery of the psalm, isn't it? In Psalm 1, verse 3, His leaf does not wither.

Well, leaves might wither if there's a drought. Right? And the point of the imagery is saying that even if there's a drought, His leaves won't wither. Well, that implies that there'll be a drought. That implies that there'll be hardship.

[19:01] Okay? So these psalms aren't unrealistic. They're not failing to recognize that God's people will go through difficulty. So if we say that you can know God's favor, that God knows you, we're not saying that God is promising people a pain-free, easy life.

That's not the case. But, what we can say is that if you know God and if He knows you, then your life is not a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.

It means something because you belong to Him. Knowing God's favor is essential. We see that in these psalms. And life is essential in these psalms.

Again, that's presented poetically in verse 3, isn't it? Being like a tree planted by streams of water. In a desert, plants die. If they're irrigated or if they're planted by a stream, plants live.

This is an image not merely of God's favor, but of life. The life that's in view here, as well, is eternal life. It's life in the presence of God.

[20:06] 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. This psalm is looking forward to something final and decisive.

And it's offering you eternal life. Indeed, if you were to compare verse 3 of Psalm 1 to Revelation, you could do this later this evening if you want, Revelation chapter 22, you'll see that the language is very similar.

And the language of a tree planted here, a plant, planted here, it's probably the image of a tree planted in God's temple, in the presence of God. So, why does blessedness matter to you? Well, it matters because it's everything. To know God's blessing means to know God's favor. It means that he knows you, and he acknowledges you, he owns you, and therefore, it means life. Not just now, but life forever. And the opposite of that is unthinkable. Because if you don't know this blessing, remember what we read in Proverbs, those who hate me hate life, and they love death. [21 : 22] rejecting this blessing, not having this blessing, means death. So, this blessing means everything. That takes us to a final question.

We've considered why we would want to look at 3,000-year-old poetry, because it's the key to the Psalter, because it's the key to life. We've looked at why we would consider both of these psalms, because it's clearly marked that they go together, that to understand one of them, and we need the other.

We've been thinking about why this is so important, because it's about blessing. Blessedness means God's favor, and it means eternal life. So, the final question that I want us to ask is, who can be blessed?

Or, to put it slightly differently, how can I know blessing? It seems really simple, doesn't it? Look at Psalm 1. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night.

Now, obviously all of us, I think, would acknowledge that that's the kind of life that we ought to seek to live, and we should try to do that. But who here tonight could say, I've done such a good job of living in this way, that I can be certain that God looks upon me favorably because of my obedience. [22 : 58] Think of the kind of thing that we read in other psalms. Later on in Psalm 17, for example, in Psalm 17, verse 3, we read, You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, you have tested me, and you will find nothing.

I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress. That's a bold claim, right? I wouldn't challenge God to examine my heart and to see what he finds because I know what he'd find.

If that's all these psalms are saying, how can we know that we can have life if it's just simply a case of going out and being sufficiently obedient?

That's why it's so important that we read Psalm 1 together with Psalm 2. Who is Psalm 2 about? Psalm 2 is not about you.

To put it crassly, you're not the hero of Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is about God's king. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, let us burst their bonds apart. [24 : 19] God doesn't think much of this. He who sits in heaven laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury, saying, as for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.

And then the king answers. I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, you are my son. Today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage.

Psalm 2 is about God's king. And what we come to recognize is that because Psalms 1 and 2 go together, Psalm 1 is also about God's king.

Yes, we should strive to live that way, but what Psalm 1 is really presenting us with is a portrait of Jesus. If you look at what Psalm 1 says that we're supposed to do, the blessed man in Psalm 1 is supposed to get a copy of God's law, he's supposed to meditate on it day and night, and then he will prosper, because of his obedience, he will prosper in everything that he does.

In Deuteronomy 17, there's a law about God's king. And God's king was supposed to get a copy of the law, he was supposed to meditate on it day and night, and because he did that, he would prosper in everything that he did, and his kingdom would endure forever.

[25 : 51] Implicitly, Psalm 1 is presenting us with the king who is explicitly revealed to us in Psalm 2. And we can ask, why does Jesus know the Father's blessing?

Jesus knows blessing because he deserves it. Philippians chapter 2 says that Jesus became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. Jesus was blessed because of his obedience.

And the wonderful news is that you can know God's blessing through him, through faith in him. I don't know what your practice is here, but in my experience, communion season, well, a communion service, would always conclude with Psalm 72, the end of Psalm 72. And I always thought that was wonderfully appropriate because at the end of Psalm 72, it's speaking about the king, isn't it? And it says, his name forever shall endure, last like the sun it shall. [27 : 04] Men shall be blessed in him and blessed all nations shall him call. Do you see what Psalm 72 is telling us? The king is blessed and everyone who is in him is blessed.

It's telling us the same thing that Psalms 1 and 2 tell us. Do you notice that statement of blessing in Psalm 1 and Psalm 2? It's similar, but different.

Do you notice that in Psalm 1, it's singular, blessed is the man, that there's one person who does this. In Psalm 2, it's plural, blessed are all who take refuge.

So the first one is singular, the second one is plural, and the first one is about doing, and the second one is about trusting. In the first one, blessed is the man who does these things, who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked, but on the contrary, delights in God's law.

In Psalm 1, blessedness is on the basis of doing. At the end of Psalm 2, blessedness is on the basis of trusting. Blessed are all who take refuge in him, who take refuge in the king.

[28 : 19] This is tremendous. You can know the blessing of God either through your perfect obedience, which won't work for any of us, or you can know blessing through the perfect obedience of Jesus.

And that's what's offered to you in the gospel. That's why the gospel is so tremendous, because God isn't coming to you and telling you, try a little harder. Here's some advice about how you can live a better life.

In the gospel, Jesus comes to you and says, here is life. Not because of what you do, but because of what he has done. His death in your place and his perfect obedience in your place.

Seeing these two psalms together is so important, because it helps you to see Jesus in them. And Jesus is important, because he's the one who enables you to understand the rest of the psalms.

All of the rest of the psalms point to Jesus in one way or another. Sometimes they give you the very words of Jesus. But then maybe even more importantly than that, Jesus is so important, because he's the one through whom you can know God's blessing.

[29 : 32] If you're here this evening and you're a Christian, and I suspect almost all of you are, that's the tremendous blessing that you have in the gospel. That's what God has done for you in his son.

If there are any here this evening who don't know Jesus, this is why you should. And he calls you to come to him and to trust in him. And that takes us back to where we started.

Remember I said that these two psalms are the key to the rest of the psalter and that these two psalms are the key to life. As we finish, we can see that it might be more accurate to say that Jesus is the key to the psalms and that Jesus is the key to life and that these two psalms set Jesus before you.

May God bless his word. Thank you.