

“Blessed and Blameless”

Aleph - Psalm 119:1-8

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David Rivas

Theme: The blessedness of those who walk according to and have a longing for God’s word.

Walk This Way (vv. 1-3)

- 1 Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the Lord!
- 2 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
 who seek him with their whole heart,
- 3 who also do no wrong,

The psalmist opens this section, and the psalm itself, with a repetition of the exact same word “blessed,” in verses 1 and 2 (the only place this occurs), calling the reader’s attention to what characterizes a “blessed” person. It’s reminiscent of the first line of Psalm 1 and the last line of Psalm 2, which taken together, describe those who trust the Lord as being “blessed.” It may also bring to mind the beatitudes from Matthew 5:3-12.

Psalm 1:1

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;

Psalm 2:12

Kiss the Son,
 lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
 for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

The poet begins this psalm with an announcement that the blessedness of the Lord's people is bound up with a life that consists of “walk[ing] in the law of the Lord” and “keep[ing] his testimonies..., precepts... [and] statutes.” The two major metaphors in this section are that of the blessed person who *walks* and *keeps*. The word translated “blessed” (‘esher/’eser) means “to go or be straight, to go on, to advance, to be right,” and it always refers to people but never to God. Vine writes that it basically connotes a state of “prosperity” or “happiness” that comes when a superior bestows his favor (blessing) on a person intentionally. This is not synonymous with fortune or luck. The word is also emphatic, always used in the plural number, indicating that it is immeasurable or incomparable. The NASB 1995 appropriately renders this “how blessed,” and many scholars believe this word is best translated as “happy” as in Deuteronomy 33:29 below, in which God is bestowing that happiness:

“Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,
a people saved by the Lord,
the shield of your help,
and the sword of your triumph!
Your enemies shall come fawning to you,
and you shall tread upon their backs.”

The Septuagint uses a word for “blessed” that means to be happy, but not in the usual sense of happiness based on positive circumstances, but describes the kind of happiness that comes from receiving divine favor.

We learn first that the “way” of those who are “blessed” (or happy) is described as “blameless,” or devoid of defect, and otherwise having integrity, both physically (without defect) and spiritually (blameless, devout, upright). The word has the fundamental idea of completeness or wholeness. Jones writes, “It does not mean sinless... ‘Blameless’ means that no fault is evident in a person's life which demonstrates a lack of ‘wholehearted’ devotion to the Lord (v. 2) or a proneness to consistent wrongdoing that attracts blame from others and from God” (p. 31).

The Septuagint translates this with a word meaning “above reproach,” or without spot or blemish, used literally to describe the absence of defects in sacrificial animals. Figuratively, it means morally or spiritually blameless, unblemished by the marring of sin, a perfect description of the Lamb of God, and something that we empowered by the Holy Spirit should strive for with diligent study of God’s Word.

Blessed and Blameless

The psalmist is stating the simple fact that being “blameless,” or living a life that is above reproach is a blessing; it results in happiness. Some may argue that sounds really boring; that a life with sin in it is more fun, and we may even be tempted to buy into that. But in verses 1-2 the writer tells us that is not true, but rather “blessed (or how happy) are those whose way is blameless” (v. 1). Sin is what causes unhappiness, and apart from being instructed by God through his word, we human beings don’t know how to become happy. The poet realizes that we need God to show us the way to a happy life, and it’s centered on “walking in the law of the Lord” (v. 2). God’s word tells us what God’s general will is, and making sure that we know that, we find happiness, true happiness, in knowing and then doing what God’s will is.

The person who is truly blessed is characterized by what they do. Notice again the imagery used in verses 1-3 in particular to describe those who are blessed individuals. The blessed find themselves in the way (or path, road) of blamelessness doing what? Not sitting. Those who are experiencing the blessed life “walk in the law of the Lord” (v. 1) and seek to “walk in his ways” (v. 3). To truly enjoy this blessed life, a type of holy walking must become a habit. There is no sluggishness here. The blessed life is not referred to here as a static one, but rather one in which walking occurs. Are you feeling like you’re in a slump? The solution is not to simply read the Bible so the beauty of the language makes you feel better. There is a practical action, active obedience to God’s word in order to experience true happiness, a real blessed life. Forward

progress is expected. Knowing what God wants and acting on it, pleasing him results in true happiness.

The psalmist sees a direct connection between being blameless (above reproach) and walking in the law of the Lord. We wouldn't know what a pure life was apart from God showing us in his word. Granted, God made us with a conscience to know generally right from wrong, but there are some aspects of a blameless life that we learn only from the Word of God.

The Lord and His Law

The first word used to describe God's word is "law," or "torah" (see table above). The word was used to describe the first five books, but it's understood to be all of God's written revelation. To us, readers in a time beyond that of this writer, this refers to God's complete word, the Old and New Testaments. And in verse 1 we learn that to live a truly blessed life, one that is blameless, one must walk in it.

In verse 2, the psalmist employs parallelism equating the image of walking in God's law with keeping the Lord's "testimonies," thereby introducing the second synonym for God's word, testimony, which is a reference to God's faithfulness and trustworthiness (see table above). What do blessed people do with the Lord's testimony? They "keep" it, or guard, watch over, preserve it. We have to get something first in order to be able to guard or preserve it, right? And in order to keep it well, we must have a firm grip on it. This is an action that involves not just hearing, but doing. It's a blessing to hear or read God's word, but it should not end there. We must do what it says.

James 1:22-25 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Are you regularly, habitually, actively pondering and practicing God's Word?

The second half of verse 2 continues the description of the blessed, happy person. He or she seeks (a word used to describe frequenting a place) the Lord "with their whole heart" (v. 2). To do such a thing must include diligent study of God's written revelation. While there are good and important ways to seek God like serving, worship, and prayer, how do you know how to properly serve, worship, and pray? You look to God's word! This seeking is quantified at the end of verse 2. The blessed person seeks with their "whole heart." The "heart" can be used figuratively very widely for the feelings, the will and even the intellect; likewise for the center of anything (Strong's). Taking these close readings of these individual words, we can conclude that this seeking must happen regularly, with a focused mind and heart. A distracted mind takes attention away from what you're trying to focus. A divided heart has its affections in other places, and both miss out on blessing.

Summary so far: The blessed person walks a blameless path (is characterized by a life that is above reproach), walks in the law of the Lord (actively moves toward obedience), keeps his testimonies (habitually turns to God’s faithfulness and trustworthiness), and seeks him with all of their heart (an undivided affection and undistracted mind). Verse 3 repeats the principles that they do no wrong (are “blameless” or above reproach), but rather walk in the Lord’s ways. They have learned what God says in his written revelation, the Lord gives grace to walk in his ways.

A Prayer for Obedience (vv. 4-8)

- 4 You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
- 5 Oh that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
- 6 Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
- 7 I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous rules.
- 8 I will keep your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me!

In verse 4 begins to address God in a prayer, a position held for most Psalm 119. The writer describes how God’s precepts are to be kept: “diligently.” This word means “vehemently; by implication, wholly, [and] speedily” (Strong’s). On this verse, Spurgeon observed that “God’s precepts require careful obedience: there is no keeping them by accident. Some give to God a careless service, a sort of hit or miss obedience, but the Lord has not commanded such service, nor will he accept it.”

Verse 5 is a supplication for the ability to obey God’s word. We lack the ability to do it on our own. The divine commands of God should guide the direction of our prayers. When faced with a command from the scriptures, may this be the prayer that we plead to the Lord! Again, quoting Spurgeon, he observes that the psalmist “longed for the Lord to influence his will, as well as to strengthen his hands.” Do you pray for God to empower you to keep his commands?

Verse 6 shows us what happens when our eyes are not “fixed on all of [God’s] commandments”: it brings shame. Specifically, *sin* brings shame, but when sin is gone, so is shame. The phrase “my eyes fixed on” is a root used to describe everything that one does with the eye, from a mere glance to a careful, sustained and favorable contemplation. The Septuagint uses a word that literally means “to turn the eyes upon,” but is understood to imply looking at something with intent and earnest contemplation. When we pay this sort of attention to the word of God, there we find the path that leads away from shame.

In verse 7 we see the effect of obedience. He didn’t want to offer up only an image or moment of praise, but rather he makes a promise to praise God with a right heart. It’s right because it’s trying to do God’s will.

In verse 8, we see the psalmist promise to keep or guard the [engraved] statutes. How do we guard it? Does God's written revelation need defending because it's a weak argument? Of course not. We defend it when our actions reflect the message. We defend it best when we praise God through obedience "with an upright heart" (v.7), and we need God's help to do that. That's why the writer pleads that God will not utterly forsake him in the final line. He is desperate and keenly conscious of his inability to be blameless if he was forsaken. Without God, he would be lost.

As we wrap up, I'd like to invite you to return to the opening line for a moment, where the Lord is named. Throughout Psalm 119, God is referred to as "the LORD," save for verse 115 where he is referred to as "my God." The term "Lord" is printed in two ways in English translations of the Old Testament when it applies to God. This is so that the reader knows which of the two Hebrew words is being used. "Lord" means "master, owner, or ruler," while "LORD" as it is printed in verse 1 refers to the divine name "I AM WHO I AM," abbreviated to "I AM." You may recall when Moses asked God for his name, this was God's response, and because of the way in which the tense of a verb is expressed in Hebrew, this can also be rendered as "I will be who I will be." It points to who God is and will be, and to what he has done and will do for his people. What a blessing it is that we can look at the Lord's promises to us with confidence because of his flawless track record of faithfulness to his people.

Conclusion

The two major metaphors in the section as we mentioned before or that of *walking* (vv. 1, 3, 5) and *keeping* or *guarding* (vv. 2, 4, 8). Both of these actions are used in the New Testament as well, and more is involved here than merely knowing the law of the Lord.

Luke 1:6 And they [John the Baptist's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth,] were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

John 13:17 [In the upper room, Jesus said to his disciples,] If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

John 14:15 [About to promise the Holy Spirit helping and dwelling ministry to believers, Jesus said,] If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Ephesians 4:1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called

1 Timothy 6:20 O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge,"

Matthew 7:21-27 24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man

who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

James 1:22-25 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.