

Psalm 119:1-8

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] States of America contains in its opening lines the following memorable words. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And it goes on. Though I'm particularly interested in this right that is identified, we can quibble whether it is a right or not, but nonetheless the one that is identified that we're particularly interested in is this pursuit of happiness. More recently, just two or three weeks ago, our First Minister, Nicholas Sturgeon, gave a TED Talk. I don't know if you're familiar with TED Talks, but they've become quite famous, I guess, different important people who will give a short talk on a subject of some description. And Nicholas Sturgeon gave one of these TED Talks, as I say, I think it was towards the end of July. And it generated some interest because in her talk, it was a very long talk, you can find it online if you're interested, she challenged the use of GDP, gross domestic product, as the sole or principal measure of a nation's fortunes. And she was arguing that what we need is a measure that is broader in measuring what she speaks of as well-being. So rather than focusing exclusively on economic prosperity, on production, we need to find a way of measuring well-being if we're going to determine the fortunes of a nation. And the goal, she argued, and here I'm quoting her directly, the goal should be a healthy and happy society. So once again, this focus on happiness as being a goal to be pursued, as a good to be secured, personally, but also collectively as a society.

Now, I listened to what she had to say. I'm sympathetic to her perspective. But the key question, I think, is this. How can we be happy? How can we secure happiness? What is the road we must travel in the pursuit, not only the pursuit, but in finding and embracing and enjoying happiness?

And as we think about that question, let's turn to God's Word in this section of Psalm 119 that we read a few moments ago. And read what it says at the beginning of the chapter again. And here I'm going to read from the Good News Bible, which is perhaps more of a paraphrase than a translation, but captures the sense sometimes, I wouldn't say more helpfully, but adds another angle to what is being said.

And in the text. So let's just read the first verse in that version of the Bible. Happy are those whose lives are faultless, who live according to the law of the Lord. Happy are those who follow His commands, who obey Him with their whole heart. And really the one difference to the version that we've read from, or the significant difference, is the use of the word happy instead of the word blessed. Of course, it's the case that the Hebrew word can be translated in either way, and context will determine what is the most appropriate. Though, of course, even the English words are very connected. I want to spend a few Sunday evenings studying this psalm. Now, we won't preach on every section in the psalm, but we'll select a few of the 22 sections. Now, this psalm, Psalm 119, as some of you will be aware, is a Hebrew acrostic poem. Each of the 22 sections begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and following the order of the Hebrew alphabet, which is made up of 22 letters. So each section begins with one of those letters. And then the complexity is increased in that within each section, each verse begins with that letter that corresponds to the section. So you'll notice there in the Bible, if you do have your Bible open, you'll notice that there is actually a little picture of the Hebrew letter, and then in English what the letter is called, in this case Aleph, which just coincidentally begins with the letter A, but that's just really a coincidence that it's the same letter that begins our alphabet. So, obviously in translation you lose that complexity, but in

Hebrew each of these verses would begin with the letter Aleph. So that's the nature of the poem. It's a poem that celebrates God's law and reflects on the value of it and the attitude of the believer towards it. And it does so in many ways and from many different angles. And I think it is striking and significant that the very first word of the psalm is the word happy or blessed. And that fact alone tells us a great deal about God who speaks through the psalmist. God's desire for us is that we be happy, that we be blessed. God's laws have been given with that object, not to be a straitjacket, not to frustrate us, not to forbid us from enjoying life, but rather that his laws, his decrees, his statutes, and all the different words that are used in the psalm would help us secure a lasting happiness, happiness, that the laws would give us a structure with one which we can live happy and fulfilled and blessed lives. Now this evening we're going to think about this first section. Let me just explain how I want us to consider this first section. And what we'll do is, and we'll spend most of the time doing this, we'll walk through the section identifying a few aspects, I think I've got five aspects of, that are spoken of in relation to this matter of happiness or blessedness.

[6 : 27] Consider them each in turn, just as we go through the text. But then having done that, and consider the psalm, I guess, on its own merits, I suppose, as written by the psalmist. We'll then go through it again, much more briefly, but considering each of them in the light of Jesus. And how does our understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done shed light on the psalm and maybe answer some of the questions that arise when we look at it simply at face value, as we're going to do to begin with. So I hope that makes sense, and if not now, hopefully by the end. So let's just go through the psalm and notice some aspects that are covered there within the psalm. The first thing I want to look at is the first three verses, and I'm entitling the first three verses as a happy ideal and aspiration. In verse one, the matter is stated plainly, blessed are those whose ways are blameless.

This is the secret of happiness or blessedness, to be blameless, to walk according to the law of the Lord. It's not difficult to understand what's said. We may agree with it, we may disagree with it, but what is stated is clear enough. What the psalmist is arguing, his thesis is this, that happiness comes from obeying God, and from walking in His ways. Now how many people buy that? How many people buy that here this evening? How many people buy that in the city that we live in? And I suspect not many. Not many buy that thesis. Not many would agree with that statement. I wonder if Nicola Sturgeon, in her concern for the happiness of the great Scottish public, will be urging us to walk according to the law of the Lord. You see, if she's really concerned for our happiness, that's the very best thing she could do. From her position of authority, she should say, I want Scotland to be happy. And the way Scotland can be happy as if we obey God's law. If we walk in His ways, that's the way. I don't doubt her genuine desire that we be happy, but I suspect she wouldn't buy the recipe that is being given to us here in the psalm.

Sadly, the evidence would point in another direction when the parliament that her government has control of often very deliberately goes against God's law, the very law that would secure for our nation the happiness that is spoken of here. I think for most the pursuit of happiness involves walking according to their own values and desires. Indeed, the idea that to submit to the law of another secures happiness seems bizarre to many. Indeed, to submit to the law of another would be for many the very essence of unhappiness rather than happiness. Notice also in the beginning of the psalm here how this is all about life and living. Not just about intellectual assent to God's law and saying, well, that's good and yes, those are good laws and they're just laws. It's all about living. Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Ways and walk is all about life. It's how you live your life.

How do you walk? Our ways and our walking are the measure of our happiness. But of course, as we look at these first three verses as an ideal or an aspiration, that kind of brings to fore this reality that there is a problem. The demand that is placed upon us that we might be happy is simply too great. Blessed are those whose ways are blameless. We might even agree with that. We might say, well, that's true, but we've still got a problem. And the problem is that our ways are not blameless. So, we might say, well, that's wonderful and it would be great if my ways were blameless, but they're not. So, where does that leave me?

That's the problem. Indeed, in verse 3, the problem is even more acute in the manner in which the psalmist expresses himself. He speaks of these happy people and he says, they do no wrong. They do no wrong.

[10:56] Well, who here could stand up and say, well, that's me. That's me. I never do anything wrong. And look how happy I am. If anybody said that, I would question, I don't know if I should say, question your sanity. That might be a bit strong, but I probably would. I wouldn't say it, but I would think it. Nothing wrong ever, really? You see, that's the problem. Do nothing wrong. It's just not going to happen. So, I wonder what's going on here. Are we, is it the case that we're maybe even being cruelly taunted with an ideal that is unreachable? Now, I think it is an ideal, but I think it can also be described as an aspiration. Do you want to live in this way? Even if you acknowledge that you don't, do you want to live in a way that is pleasing to God, that is in obedience to His commandments? Is that what you want to do? This is a matter of the heart, as verse 2 reminds us. Blessed are those who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart. This is a matter of the heart. What we want, what we desire will determine in great measure what we do and how we behave. But where do we stand if we genuinely aspire to meet this ideal but fall short? Which is maybe true for many of us. Well, we all fall short, but it's maybe true for many of us that we aspire to the ideal but fall short of it. I think it is reasonable to conclude that while perfect blessedness requires a perfect life, a measure, a real genuine measure of blessedness or happiness accompanies a measure of obedience and walking the way of the wise. I think experience bears that out. A genuine striving after a holy, God-pleasing life is ordinarily accompanied by a measure of blessing and happiness. It doesn't mean that everything goes well for us, but that we do enjoy a measure of blessedness, of contentedness, of happiness as we strive to live this life, even though we fall short of the perfection that is spoken of here.

Well, that's the first thing. The first three verses, we're describing them as an ideal or an aspiration. But then I want to move on to verse 4 that I'm speaking of as or describing as a challenging demand. In verse 4, there's a slight shift because in verse 4, the psalmist moves from describing this ideal to addressing God directly. He's addressing God in verse 4. In verses 1 to 3, he's been saying, this is true. You know, this is the happy man. This is the happy woman.

But now he addresses God. He says, you have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. And so he's speaking to God and declaring this. And so there is that shift in the psalm. And the subject matter is largely the same. What do we make of that? This challenging demand that God places upon us that the psalmist recognizes. You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. Well, again, the problem is this demand for full obedience. And this full obedience is not simply a means to an end, if it were possible, namely the end of happiness. It's an absolute demand on the part of God. God demands full obedience. And we're left in a bit of a daze. See, on the one hand, we acknowledge God's prerogative to make such demand. But on the other hand, we're conscious of our utter inability to step up to the mark. What happens if we don't render full obedience? Other than a loss of happiness, what other consequences are there? The psalm doesn't enter into that. But we know from the Bible that the wages of sin is death. When we fail to render full obedience, that is a consequence of that. Now, people will sometimes respond to a testing demand with the attitude, well, I'm up for it. I'm up for the challenge. Maybe in your own life there have been circumstances that seem very difficult and you said, well, it is difficult, but I'm up for the challenge. I'm up for that. And what about in this challenge? We may well genuinely desire to live such a life, rendering to God full obedience, we may strive towards meeting the demand, but we know that it's beyond us. We know that in this life, we will never be able to render to God full obedience. So, this demand is a challenging one, but again, it leaves us concerned at our inability to respond to it. But the psalmist goes on, and in verses 5 and 6, we have what I'm calling a realistic self-appraisal. Because in these two verses, he speaks about himself, he reveals something of his own circumstances, of his own response to what he has been talking about. For the first time, the psalmist speaks about himself, and he shares with us what I'm calling a realistic self-appraisal. Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees, then I would not be put to shame. And he goes on. So, what the psalmist is doing here, what he's doing here is he's acknowledging that his ways are not steadfast. He's just told us that that's what's required, full obedience, steadfast obedience. And he's saying, but as for me, I don't reach that ideal.

I wish I did. Oh, that my ways were steadfast. And clearly, what's implicit is they're not. They're not steadfast. I would desire them to be. I long for them to be, but they're not. My ways are not steadfast. I don't render to God full obedience. I don't flawlessly obey God's decrees. And there's almost a whimsical flavor to the desire expressed. Oh, that my ways were steadfast. How wonderful that would be. It's not. But oh, what a wonderful thing it would be. Were I able to obey God steadfastly?

I think we can echo the confession of the psalmist. We are like him. We recognize that we don't render to God steadfast obedience. But he also speaks of his shame. Notice there in verse 6, then I would not be put to shame. Again, he's speaking about himself. Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands. What do we make of this, the shame that he speaks of? Sometimes in the Psalms, we read of how believers can be shamed and humbled by God's enemies. They mock them and humble them and shame them. But here, the nature of the shame is quite different. It seems to me that what the psalmist is describing is the shame he himself experiences when he considers God's commands and appreciates how far short he falls. Nobody is shaming him. He himself is turning to God's Word. He's seeing what God demands. He's looking in the mirror and he says, well, I fall so far short, and he's ashamed. He's ashamed of that reality. He's ashamed of his disobedience. He's ashamed of his lack of steadfastness. He's ashamed that his ways are not always in the ways of God. And so he experiences shame in that reality as he examines himself. It's not pleasant to experience shame, but it is honest to recognize our reality. It's even healthy, I think, to look at ourselves and come to honest conclusions about where we are.

[18 : 26] We should feel shame for shameful behavior. It's maybe a sign of a society that has somewhat lost its way, or perhaps more than somewhat lost its way, when we are sometimes told or it's sometimes suggested that all shame is necessarily a bad thing. But it's not. There is a shame that is healthy.

There are things that we ought to be ashamed of. And here the psalmist recognizes that. He turns to God's word, God's word itself is a kind of mirror for him, and he sees that he falls short, and he is ashamed.

But the psalmist goes on, and in verses 7 and 8, you have what I'm describing as a joyful expectation. I will praise you with an upright heart. As I learn your righteous laws, I will obey your decrees.

And I'm struck by the hope of the psalmist. Even in the face of all the evidence, to the contrary, he still harbors a joyful expectation of praise that flows from an upright heart. He's looking into the future. He's saying, that's what I, that's where I want to be. And there's almost a sense that he has a confidence that somehow he's going to get there, where from an upright heart he praises God.

He doesn't give up. He recognizes that there is work to do, even in the sense of learning God's law. I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.

[19 : 49] And the learning is not simply about memorizing the Ten Commandments, but active learning as we endeavor to put into practical obedience, or into practice obedience in our daily lives. And progress is possible. We can learn to sin less. And small successes can be immensely satisfying for us.

And so there is this joyful expectation. But then the psalm ends in a rather strange way. I'm calling it a disturbing petition. Notice the very final thing that the psalmist says. I don't know if this has ever struck you as difficult or as strange. The very last thing he says in this section is, do not utterly forsake me. He's addressing God again. And he says, do not utterly forsake me. Now, what's going on? What he says is, in a way, so strange that there's, I think, sometimes attempts to try and kind of explain it, almost and even in the punctuation that is employed. We've mentioned recently, I can't remember when, that, you know, in Hebrew you don't have punctuation. So in English, you introduce the punctuation because we need it. But of course, how you punctuate something can have a big impact on its meaning. And here the punctuation does impact on its meaning. Because notice the way it's been translated. I will obey your decrees, semicolon, do not utterly forsake me.

So the idea seems to be to bring the two together. And the sense of the verse, as it has been translated and punctuated, is along these lines. I will obey, but it's so difficult, I need your help.

So please don't forsake me in withholding that help. I want to obey. I can't do it alone. Please don't forsake me. Because if you do, I won't be able to. That may be, that may be what the psalmist has in mind. But I kind of think that if the psalmist had wanted to say to God, I need your help, he could just have said, please help me. But he doesn't.

He says something much more powerful, much more difficult for us to understand. Do not utterly forsake me. I think that the final petition or plea is an honest cry from a sinful but devoted heart.

[21 : 58] It's the cry of one who recognizes that God would be in his rights to forsake him. But the very prospect is so distressing that he begs God not to do so. Do not utterly forsake me. Well, that's just gone through, walked through the psalm in its own rights. Now, much more briefly, let's just look at it again.

But with the light, as it were, of Jesus shining on it. Now, that sounds very, sounds like some modern quotas, you know, the light of Jesus shining on it. Really what I mean is in the light of who Jesus is and in the light of what Jesus has done. Let's look at the psalm. And see, as we do, the part that Jesus plays in securing for us lasting happiness or blessedness. Notice how we began.

He began by looking at the psalm and said, at the beginning of the psalm, you have this happy ideal or aspiration. The man whose ways are blameless, who keeps all of God's statutes.

Well, we know that Jesus is the blessed man. He's the man who has done this. He's the man who has walked the walk. He's the man who has lived life blamelessly, just as described in this psalm.

And the wonderful reality that we know to be true in the light of the New Testament is that he lived that blameless life in our place. If he had lived it only as an example for us, then really he would be adding nothing to what we have here. He would be simply saying, well, the psalmist said you had to live a blameless life. I've lived a blameless life. Now you do it.

[23 : 32] We would be no further forward. We would be equally unable to do it. But he doesn't live that blameless life principally to give us an example of how to do it that we can't follow. He lived that blameless life for us in our place. He's our substitute, not only in death, but in life as well.

The happy ideal is reality in the person of Jesus. The challenging demand that God makes, of course, is one that Jesus stood up to and stood up to the plate. It points to Jesus, the one who was obedient even unto death, who was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin.

Jesus fully obeyed, and he fully obeyed for us. In Psalm, we notice the psalmist's realistic self-appraisal of how he falls short, how he's not steadfast. And with the psalmist, we recognize that we fall short, that we are sinners. But we know that Jesus died for sinners, and that Jesus has secured our pardon. And so while we recognize our guilt and we recognize our sin, we do so in the light of that wonderful reality that there is forgiveness of sins for those who trust in Jesus. We noticed how the psalmist expresses this joyful expectation in verse 7, and I will praise you with an upright heart. And that elusive, upright heart is available for us in the gospel. The work of God by His Spirit is to transform us from the heart into the likeness of His Son. And then just a moment ago, we were thinking about reflecting on what that final petition, that very disturbing petition means, or where it's coming from. I'm not suggesting we can really, or that we've explained that accurately. But nonetheless, we come back to this disturbing petition, do not utterly forsake me, and think about it in the light of Jesus.

I think I can understand the place from where this cry is uttered. We don't know the author of the psalm, but whoever authored the psalm, I think you can maybe understand where he's coming from when he cries out in this way, do not utterly forsake me. But the wonderful reality for us in the light of Jesus, and in the light of what Jesus has done, is that in Jesus, in the giving of Jesus, God has shown His loving hand in such a grace-filled fashion that we can trust and know that the God who so loved us, that He sent Jesus to die for us, will never utterly forsake us. It's just not going to happen.

And so we look at that, and we thank God that despite all our failings, and in the light of all our failings, we have the security that God will never utterly forsaken us. He has proved Himself to be a God who does not utterly forsake His people. Indeed, the reverse or the opposite is the case. He so loved us that He sent Jesus to live that blameless life for us, to bear the sins that we deserve for us, to work in us that we might, little by little and step by step, be able to approximate more to this blessed ideal that is set out for us for our good and for our happiness. So may God help us so to live, and to know and to enjoy something of that blessedness and happiness that the psalmist speaks of. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that You have indeed given us laws for our good and for our well-being and for our welfare. We acknowledge that we find it difficult to obey laws. We enjoy disobeying. We have a bent towards rebellion. We find rebellion exciting and alluring.

[27 : 36] We are so often concerned with our own independence and doing our own thing and living as we see fit and imagining that that will bring us happiness. And yet, sometimes when we're honest, we acknowledge that it simply hasn't worked out that way. Help us to turn to Your Word and to discover in Your Word the way of happiness. You have created us. You know what makes us tick. You know what makes us happy.

And we pray that we would humbly submit to Your greater wisdom, and that we would test You in this and discover that what You say is to be true. We thank You especially for Jesus. We thank You for His blameless life. We thank You for His atoning death. We thank You for His continuing work in us and for us.

And help us to become ever more like Him. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.