



Rev Chris Taylor - 2-17-19
The Beginning of Wisdom

Ask people what one thing that would want for someone they care about – their child, grandchild, spouse or friend – and ultimately the vast majority would say, “to be happy.” We might have different ideas about how to find it, but it is happiness that is the common theme; happiness that we would hope for both for ourselves and those we love. It is what scripture calls “being blessed.”

There are two different words in the Hebrew that are often translated as “blessed;” “baruk” and “eshet”. The distinction between them is important. The first, baruk, is a blessing that is bestowed. And so, for example, in Genesis 1:28 we find God blessing the man and the woman that he has created. They haven’t done anything. God simply chooses to give them his blessing – the seal of his favor, the promise of his protection and provision. “Baruk” is a blessing that is bestowed.

With “eshet” there is a very different sense. This isn’t a blessing bestowed, but a blessing that is experienced. It refers to a condition or to a state of being. And so, for example, we have the New American Standard version of Proverbs 8:34, “Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts.” This sounds like “baruk” (a blessing bestowed as a reward for right behavior), but the teacher makes it clear by using “eshet” that this is something different. Through his behavior the “man” enters into the space that we would call “blessed”. The blessedness, in other words, isn’t something bestowed, but the natural outcome of the choices “he” has made.

The Revised Standard Version, or New Revised Standard that we use, picks up on the distinction by generally translating “eshet” not as “blessed” but as “happy.” So, “Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.”

It is this second sense of “blessed” that we find in the first verse of the very first psalm. The person whose delight is in the law of the Lord is going to experience that condition that we call “happy.” The psalmist isn’t saying “do these

things and you will earn God's favor." What he is talking about, rather, is what naturally flows out of a mindset focused on God's will.

It is like exercising every day. If we exercise regularly we know certain things are going to follow: our metabolisms will speed up; our hearts will be healthier; and there is more and more evidence that even our minds will benefit. All these are the result of recognizing and taking advantage of the way our bodies are designed. By exercising we are living into that design; living in a way that is congruent with the way our bodies work.

In the same way, follow God's will and we are going to find that life goes better. That's what the psalmist is saying. This isn't about God giving something or with-holding something. Do these things, rather, and we begin to mesh with the world around us; mesh with the underlying forces and dynamics that shape all creation. We become like trees planted by streams of water. We begin to flourish. We begin to bear all kinds of fruit. We begin, as the psalmist puts it, "to prosper."

What's the key? There's the rub. The psalmist is very specific: it is those who delight in the law of the Lord; those who meditate upon it day and night – they are the ones who are going to be blessed. They are the ones who are going to experience this ongoing state of happiness.

The problem here is obvious. Who in their right mind delights in the law? For most of us, "law" is not a happy word. It conjures images of something that restricts, something that limits us, something that keeps us from doing what feels natural and right. Think about driving down Fox Chapel Road at a comfortable 35 mph. What happens at the bottom? You enter into O'Hara and all of a sudden the speed limit drops to 25. Everything in you, every visual cue, says "this should be 35," but it's not. And it has become, as a result, a nice little income stream for the borough of O'Hara.

Think Robert Frost's famous wall. There is something in us that doesn't like the law. It feels confining. It holds us back. Who, but a lawyer, could find delight in something like the tax code?

So when we hear the psalmist talk about finding delight in the law or meditating upon it day and night our first reaction might be, "Well, that's okay for

the psalmist but it's not going to happen for me." The very thought of it feels tedious and oppressive.

But what if what we are talking about is not the law and everything we associate with it, but rather "instruction"? "Instruction" has a different feel, doesn't it? And that, in fact, is one of the primary meanings of the Hebrew word "torah" which we have translated as "law" here in our text.

Consider the first five books of the Bible: Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers and Deuteronomy. Often referred to as the Pentateuch, in the Jewish community those five books have also been called "The Torah" for thousands of years. If "torah" is simply "law" then that would make no sense because those first five books are about so much more than the series of rules and regulations we find in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. They contain some of the most beautiful and compelling narratives in all of Scripture: the story of creation and the flood; the patriarchs and the promise that was passed from generation to generation; Moses and the great exodus out of Egypt. What we find in these first five books isn't just a series of laws, then, but insight into God and God's nature, God's will and creation itself. "Law" doesn't fit as a descriptive title for those five books. "Instruction" does.

Unlike laws that constrain, instruction reveals. Instruction offers insight. Instruction shows us how to achieve our goals, how to find what we are looking for, how to end up where we long to go.

Imagine, for example, being given Lego's 5000 piece model of the Millennium Falcon. Could you imagine trying to put that together without the instructions? You don't resent the instructions. You search for them. You welcome them. You know they hold the key to somehow pulling all those pieces together into a coherent, recognizable whole.

That how God's will works. Don't think "law," think "instructions." Scripture is a gift. The instruction we find here shows us how life is meant to work; how all the different pieces of our lives are meant to come together in a coherent and beautiful whole.

Author John Kretschmer has sailed over 300,000 miles through the years (that's about twelve times around the equator). He fell in love with sailing early on, and it quickly became his passion, his life. In his book, *Sailing a Serious Ocean*, he talks about the moment he discovered pilot charts in the library. To most people a

pilot chart would be about the most un-exciting thing you can imagine: full of incomprehensible numbers, arrows, circles and slashes as they communicate wind and current information that has been collected and collated over more than a hundred years. Could you imagine anything more boring?

But for Kretschmer who longed to sail distant waters and explore unfamiliar lands, this was the stuff of dreams. He spent hours upon hours meditating upon those charts. He delighted in them, because they offered a glimpse of the life that he was looking for – instruction on how he, too, might be able to find it.

Do you want life? Then follow the charts, follow the guidance that we find here in the pages of Scripture. Sure, we can ignore everything this book has to teach us. But why would we do that? We get this idea sometimes that God is holding out on us; that God wants to keep us from the good stuff, the stuff that's really going to make our lives so much better, or so much more fun. But when we go down one of those paths what we inevitably find is that they do indeed lead to ruin. They destroy everything that matters most to us: undermining our relationships; sabotaging our gifts and our potential; keeping us from the very life for which we have longed.

God doesn't hold out on us. God isn't up there trying to figure out new ways to frustrate or limit us. That's not what God does. What God wants is the very best for every one of us, and in the pages of Scripture he has shown us the way.

Here are the charts that show us where the rocks are: the places to seek and the places to avoid. Embrace the instructions. Meditate upon them and delight in them the way Kretschmer delighted in those pilot charts he found in the library. They show us the way this life works; show us how to find that space in which our lives mesh with the way this world is structured and where happiness is the natural result.