

our God and our Father. What we know not, O God, teach us. What we have not, grant us. Where we cannot, help us. And where we will not, O Lord God, our Father in heaven, have mercy upon us and change us and save us. We look to you, Lord Jesus Christ, As the angel said, to your parents of old, you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Save us, oh God, from our sins this evening, and set us on the true and lasting way to everlasting life and happiness. We offer these prayers in Jesus' name, amen. But if you would please turn with me in your copy of the word of God to the Psalter and Psalm number one. This again is the word of God. Please take heed how you hear. 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. He is like a tree planted by

streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are

like the chaff, that the wind drives away. 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 the grass withers and the flower falls off, but the word of God endures forever. Our psalm this evening confronts us with a question, a question that should be of interest to all of you. Do you want to be happy? That's what the first word of the psalm means, blessed or happy. It carries the idea of being fulfilled, satisfied in life and also in death. For no happiness is worth having

that will not outlive your short-lived life on earth. Do you want to be happy this evening? Of course you do. No human being can pretend indifference to that question. We all want to be happy, and none of us, not even the EOers amongst us, None of us want to be miserable. And yet happiness is strangely

elusive, isn't it? We find in our age, especially in our age's penchant for constant distraction. You look at young people walking about today, and they're always having earbuds in their ears. My son Benjamin is a sophomore at NC State, and there was a... an epidemic of suicide at NC State last year. And as Ben's been looking at the student body, there are so many of the students. He says they're almost like non-player characters in a video game. You can't interact with them. They just walk about head down, hoodie up, and the earbuds perennially in their ears. And it reminds me of W.H. Auden's famous poem in which he says, faces along the bar cling to their average day. The lights must never go out. The music must always play. Lest we should see where we are,

lost in a haunted wood, children afraid of the night, who have never been happy or good. I sometimes think we have these earbuds and constantly the constant refrain of music to distract us. from the sadness and the emptiness that by nature haunts every human being. We live our lives in this world east of Eden and deep in every human heart is the longing to get back to paradise. The question of course is, what is paradise and where can it be found? And the psalmist this evening in our text is pointing us in that direction. Now I wonder, does it surprise you that the book of Psalms begin with Psalm 1. You might expect the Psalms to begin with a great Psalm of worship, like Psalm 146. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord while I live. I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. Or Psalm 150. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Or Psalm 95, oh come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker. Would that not be a better place to begin the Psalms? The hymn book of praise in the Bible. Or maybe you might think the Psalms would begin with a Psalm of comfort, like Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Or Psalm 46, be still and know that I am God. Or Psalm 91, he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Wouldn't you maybe expect the psalmist to begin there? But he begins here in this strange psalm that has to do with happiness. But if you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Psalm 1 stands like two golden arches through which every worshiper must pass when they enter the hymn book of the Bible. Derek Kidner describes the psalm as a doorkeeper to the rest of the Psalter. It confronts us with the basic choice that alone gives reality to worship, the divine truth that must inform it, and with the ultimate judgment that looms beyond it. The psalm confronts you, and it confronts me, with the basic question. Are you even ready to sing the praise of God? Is your soul on the trajectory of worship? Have you tasted and seen of the goodness of God? That he is not only the greatest of all beings, but also the best, and are you happy in him? Do you know that? Do you know the blessedness of which this psalm speaks? Because until you do, you will find it very difficult, if not actually impossible, to sing any of the psalms. And so the psalm sets before us a series of contrasts, contrasting choices. There are two ways, and only two. There are two plants in this psalm, the tree, and the chaff. And there are two destinations in this psalm, heaven and the congregation of the righteous, and the way of the wicked, which perishes. And really, if you look at the psalm in both the English and in the Hebrew, the first and the last words of the psalm set up and sum up the contrast in the starkest terms of hope. Look at the psalm

there for me in your Bibles. What's the first word? It's blessed. What's the last word? It's perish. That's the contrast. Blessed and perish. So I ask you this evening, each

of you here, young and old, do you know the blessedness of this psalm? Have you tasted and seen of the goodness and the glory and the blessedness of our Heavenly Father? So the psalmist says before us then, a recipe for this blessedness, a recipe for this happiness, and there are four things you must learn. If you want to be a happy soul, happy now and happy forever, there are four lessons to learn. First of all, you must follow the right rule in life. Secondly, you must find the right source of life. Thirdly, you must have the right friend in life. And lastly, you must reach the right end to life. Firstly then, to be happy, you must follow the right rule in life. And you see that there in the first opening verses. There's a rule to reject, and there's a rule to receive. Blessed is the man. And even just look at that for a second. When you look at these opening verses, the man, the happy man, is singular. He's singular. He doesn't find the plurality

of happy people until he gets to heaven. He's in the singular in this psalm. And the wicked, or in the plural, blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked ones, literally in the Hebrew, nor stands in the way of sinners, plural, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers. He seems to be by himself, surrounded by a world that's going the wrong way. It reminds me of this man once I heard about, an old man who got into his car, and he was losing his mind a little bit, and his children had hidden his keys from him, but he found them. And he got in the car, and he drives off in England, and he's going down the M5 in England, and as he's driving down the road, his daughter calls him. He says, Dad, are you in the car? Yes. Dad, be very careful. There's a news report on the M5. There's a car going the wrong way down the M5. He said, honey, it's much worse than that. There's not just one of them.

There's thousands of them. Well, the Christian can feel like that at times. It feels as if, are we the only ones heading to heaven? Are we the only ones who know God? Are we the only ones who have these convictions? And the rest of the world, even at times the rest of the church can be going in the wrong direction. Jesus says, you remember, that not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven, many, Jesus says, will say in that day, Did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many wonders in your name? And I will declare to them, I never knew you. Think about that. Mankind carpeting the ground before the great white throne of judgment as far as the eye can see. And the good shepherd shepherding

the sheep and the goats. And some of the goats are saying, Lord, you've made a mistake. You're putting us in the wrong pile. And it's not just one or two. Jesus said, many of them, many of them, many even in the professing church, are not heading to heaven. Though they're so sure that they are, they're willing to argue with the Lord Christ on that great last day of judgment. It's a sober thing. I never knew you, Jesus says, depart from me, you who practice lawlessness. So it's a very practical and important subject. But if you want to get to heaven, young people, you need to reckon in your soul right now that most of your friends don't want to get to heaven. They might think they do, but they don't really. Most of your friends are not going to go the way you will have to go if you're determined to live the way you will wish you had lived when you come to die. 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 the scoffers. Notice those verbs, walk, stand, sit. What do you notice about them? When you begin going the wrong way, you get progressively bogged down. Did you notice he becomes more and more immobile? First he's walking in the council, then he's standing in the way, and then he's sitting. Be very careful. You make your choices and then your choices make you young people. You become what you repeatedly choose to do. It's a very sober lesson many learn too late. The habits of life are too light to be felt until they're too heavy to be broken. Blessed, happy is the man who walks not in the council. Council is a word that describes advice that seems wise, prudent, sensible. And if you want to get to heaven, if you want to enter the happy life, you've got to resolve yourself to turn away from the council of the wicked. Now, what's the word wicked mean? You often think of wicked as like people who are really, really bad, like ax murderers, and ax murderers are really, really bad. You haven't heard it before, you've heard it now from the pulpit, write it down. Act murders, not good, right. But actually, wickedness in the Bible is a much more subtle mindset and lifestyle. If you turn to Psalm 18 a second, and verse 22, David makes an interesting observation. Sorry, 21. For I have kept the ways of the Lord and have not wickedly departed from my God. Now the verb in the second part of that sentence is depart, right? But in the Hebrew, the verb depart is not there. In the Hebrew, what it literally says is, I have not wickedly away from God. It makes bad English grammar, but it's great theology. that David uses the term wicked as a verb to describe the act of a soul that departs from God. That's wickedness. Wickedness is any thought, any word, any deed, any activity, any relationship that encourages your soul away from God and not towards God. It's like when you're sailing, if you were to set out from Los Angeles and sail in a sailing boat toward Hawaii, and you got the heading wrong by just one degree, by the time you got to

where Hawaii should be, it wouldn't even be visible on the horizon, just the slightest wrong trajectory. pursued and continued will lead you very, very, very far away from the mark you intend to reach. And the word wicked in the Bible means it's any lifestyle that pulls you away from God. It's the lifestyle of men and women who live a life that says you can be happy without God. You can have life without God. You can find satisfaction and fulfillment without God, and the Bible says it's simply not true. Even in the movies, take James Bond, for example. James Bond is this archetype man. He's strong, he's violent, he's resourceful. He overcomes every enemy, he gets through every obstacle. He is a surviving machine. But he's immoral, unprincipled. a philanderer. But the movie never shows that. The movie just shows the sharp suits, the washboard abs, the fast cars, the jet-setting lifestyle. But it doesn't show you that behind the scenes, the emptiness of soul and the hopelessness of eternity. And young people, if you intend to get to heaven, you need, you need, you need to look for that wisdom. The devil has a wonderful way, or a terrible way, of making the darkness look bright. To make godlessness look fulfilling. And it can look very wise and very persuasive now, but it'll not look very wise and very persuasive then when the man comes around. and you've got a set on your soul. I will not follow the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners. You start listening to the wicked, and then you start living like them. And before it's all said and done, you're laughing with them. who sits in the seat of the scoffer. To sit in Bible mind is to sit in the seat of the teacher. But these men aren't teaching people truth. They're actually laughing at truth. That it's possible to drift so far away from God that you start listening, and then you start living like them. You listen to them, you live like them, but before long, you're laughing with them at those on the way to heaven. And if you want to get to heaven, you've got to learn to say no to all that. A rule to reject, then secondly, there's a rule to receive. But his delight, his pleasure, what makes his heart glad, he doesn't just have the Bible, he doesn't just read the Bible, he loves the Bible. Remember in 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul describes people who are judged by God because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. His delight is in the law of the Lord. Now the word law is Torah in Hebrew, and it sounds very negative, like the dos and don'ts, and there's part of that, of course, but it's much more than that. The word Torah in Hebrew is a father's instruction. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon says, my son, do not forsake the Torah, the instruction of your father. Bind them around your neck. Keep

them before your eyes day and night. We've all seen that, we've seen, haven't we? Perhaps some of our friends. Perhaps not just our friends, perhaps some of you, and you've spoken to a son or a daughter, and they're dating someone, and you say, son, daughter, I just know this person's, I just, I'm very concerned about the choice you're making. But love has blinded them, and they have no ears for their father's instruction. And of course, what ends up happening is, when you children, when you ignore your parents' instruction, I promise you, what concerned your parents now will concern you a lot more in 10 years' time if you ignore it. And the psalmist speaks not about just ignoring the counsel of an earthly father, he speaks about ignoring the counsel of our heavenly father, our Abba in heaven. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates. The idea is to mutter under your breath, to be talking about it, to memorize it. You know when you learn a poem, in your school days, young people. What do you do? You walk about your bedroom and you mutter to yourself. One ship sails west, another ship sails east. By the self, same wind that blows, but it's the set of the sails and not the gales which determines which way they go. And you mutter it to yourself walking about, no, it's not this, it's that, and you're concerned to get the words right. That's the idea of the Psalmist here. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. That's not just saying at the beginning of the day and the end of the day, it's a Hebrew, figure of speech and merism, two opposites that are all inclusive. Like the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the top and the bottom. Inside and out, we use them ourselves. Two opposites that are all inclusive. Here's a man who makes God's law and God's word his constant companion. Ralph Davis in his wonderful little book, *The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life*. If you haven't got those books, they're absolutely wonderful, just like everything else. Dr. Davis writes, but he says in his commentary in this psalm, so total immersion in the word of Yahweh forms the basis of the believer's life, and it's his or her pleasure and preoccupation. And then comes the question, what is it, the counsel of the wicked? or the Torah of Yahweh which drives your life. And if I could recommend just one thing that would make the biggest difference to your life, it would be this. Hide God's word in your heart. Start memorizing scripture. It'll change the way you think. Hiding scripture in your life is like putting a hand on a glove, right? If you have a pair of gloves and you put Thomas's hands in the gloves, he plays the organ. Sounds beautiful. Put it in the hands of a baboon, not gonna have the same effect, right? And when you fill your mind with the words of God, it changes the way you think and what controls your mind controls your life and your destiny. So that's the first thing then. To be happy in life, you must

follow the right rule in life. Secondly, to be happy, you must find the right source of life. Moving on, you see that in the next verses. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Here's a man who has stability, he's planted. The Hebrew actually is transplanted. He didn't grow there by nature. He was transplanted there out of the wilderness of sin. God took this plant and transplanted it by the rivers of life. Vitality, he bears its fruit in its season. Durability, his leaf does not wither. Prosperity in whatever he does, he prospers. And those four words, you'll find them in Davis's commentary. A tree, picture it in your mind's eye. What a beautiful picture. Now look at the other plant matter, chaff. That which is rootless, lifeless, weightless, and worthless. Which do you want? And the difference, of course, is the water. Now, water in the Bible is always a picture, it's always associated with the presence of God, the life-giving presence of God. There's so much we could say there, but we just haven't got time. But think about it, think about the Psalms. Psalm 46, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. Well, there's no river in Jerusalem. Ah, but there is an invisible one, a spiritual one. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, which is the holy dwelling places of the Most High. The river is in Jerusalem because God is in Jerusalem. Or think of it another way. How does the psalmist feel when he's far away from God? What's the metaphor he uses? Has the deer pants for the streams of water? So my soul pants for God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before him? How did Jesus feel upon the cross, cast out of the Father's presence? What did he say? I thirst. And he said this, John says, not just because he was thirsty, he said this to fulfill scripture. He's showing you the ultimate terminus ad quem of being separated from God. It's to be ravaged with thirst, a deep thirst in your soul for life and joy and happiness and gladness and fulfillment. You must find the right source of life, and it's the life-giving presence of the living God. Have you found that? Do you know that? Have you found joy in the presence of God? Maybe for some of you this evening, it's a memory. You look back a year, two years, five, 10, 15 years, and you remember a time when your soul was like this tree and The roots of your soul went deep into the presence of God. You knew times of prayer, unhurried times of prayer in the presence of Jesus. And your soul was alive. You found fruit growing in your soul that wasn't naturally there. Love and joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. And then slowly but surely, you began to draw back from Jesus. to kind of slip, slide

away. And it can happen to me, it has happened to me in ministry. When I stop spending unhurried time in the presence of Jesus, when I become more focused on getting sermons for you, I'm not enough for gathering truth and food for my own soul. And if it could happen to me, and I'm paid to pray and study the Bible, in one sense, what hope do you have? Because life is so busy, the pressure's so great, the busyness of life, the desire for other things can so easily choke out the life of God in your soul. And Psalm 1 is a beacon at the

very beginning of this book of experiential religion, and it's calling you, each of you, young and old, back to the Father, back to the Father's presence, back to the Father's Son, back to the Father's Word. It's bringing you to the third point. You must have the right rule, and you must have the right source of life, and you must have the right friend in life. You see that there in verse six. Well, let's go back to verse four. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff. They have no root in God, that the wind drives away. Therefore, because they have no life in their souls, They will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. Why? For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Now, to know here means much more than just to know about. And the Lord does know about us. He knows every twist and every turn of the ways we take in life. He keeps all of your tears in a bottle. He numbers all of your paths. But it's much more intimate than that. It's the word that's used at the beginning of the Bible for Adam and Eve. The Lord, or sorry, Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived. It's a deep, penetrating knowledge. A father knowing his son, a husband knowing his wife. It's a word full of, love and care and concern. The Lord knows the way of the righteous. It's John 10. My sheep, Jesus says, hear my voice and I know them. And they follow me, and I give them everlasting life, and they shall never perish. Neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. For my Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and none can snatch them out of the Father's hand. It's Psalm 139, written large. The Lord has searched me and known me. You know when I rise up and when I sit down. You're intimately acquainted with all of my ways. You understand my thoughts from afar. Husbands, now we're sitting in a party and your wife is talking to some weird person on the far side of the room and she looks at you and she doesn't need to say a word. She just looks at you and her eyes are saying, get me out of here. Because you know her. That's the kind of knowledge.

It's a loving knowledge. In the 1950s, in communist Romania, it was a hard place to be. The communists rounded up 80,000

Christians, put them in jail. And Silvia Tinarcu was there, a little girl at that time, in grade school. And her family were devout Christians. And every day, her parents read to her the Bible. But they were dirt poor. There were eight siblings she had. And she didn't have that. She always wore hand-me-down clothes. She would walk to school through the freezing, wet Romanian winter in a four-sizes-too-big sweater with holes in it that her brother had given her. She wore her brother's old boots, and the soles were separating from the shoe, and they were stuffed with newspaper so they wouldn't fall off. And Sylvia yearned. She dreamt at night. for a jumper, a girl's jumper, and a duffel coat with those toggle buttons and a hood, and brown girly shoes with a brass buckle on them. When she went to school every day, her teachers would mock Christianity. At night, she'd go home and she'd hear her parents pray, and she began to doubt, Lord, do you really exist? Are you really there? And one night in the summer, she decided, as a little girl can do, to put God to the test. And she got down by her knees and said, Lord, are you really there? Show me. Please, Lord, I want a duffel coat with a hood and taggle buttons and a warm, girly sweater and brown, girly shoes with a brass buckle on. Are you really there, God? And she waited a day, two days, a week, two weeks, a month, six weeks. Two months later, a parcel arrives, brown paper bag wrapped up in twine from America of all places, sent by a church like this one. Her dad brought it in, family worship, began tearing open the bag. On top, there was a duffel coat with a hood, toggles. Underneath that, there was a sweater, a girl's sweater. And Sylvia ran forward. If he sent the sweater and the duffel coat, he sent the shoes too. And she reached in and grabbed two brown girly shoes with brass buckles on. And her dad said, Sylvia, whose are those? And she goes, they're mine. And all of her brothers and sisters were horrified at her selfishness. And then suddenly, Sylvia remembered. Oh no, she said, I forgot to tell God my size. So with fear and trepidation, she tells the parenting story, and she takes the shoe, and it slips onto her right foot, and it fits perfectly. And the left shoe onto the left foot, and it fits perfectly. And Sylvia thought to herself, my, God knows my size. That's the idea here. She wrote the book, it's called God Knows My Size. It's a wonderful testimony. She became a faithful missionary later in life and was arrested and spent many years in jail, but it's a wonderful story. God knows, the Lord knows the way of the righteous. If you want to be happy in life, you'll never find happiness unless you find the right friend. God is your father. and his son as your savior. And that's actually the reason I think why this psalm It's written in the singular at the start, blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. Because ultimately, just like

all of the Psalms, they point us to Jesus. They remind us that there's only ever one man who'll ever perfectly fulfill the words of Psalm 1 on both sides of the divide. He'll be the man who lives this way to provide a justifying righteousness for his people. He'll not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. He will not stand in the way of sinners. He will not sit in the feet of the scoffers. His delight will be in the law of his father. His food and drink will be to do God's law day and night. But it doesn't stop there. He doesn't just come to show us the way, he comes to experience the chaff end of the psalm as well, as he doesn't just become our example, but he becomes our sins in the presence of God. And he finds his soul withering in the far place, beyond the bottom of finite misery. And he doesn't just bear our sins, but he becomes them. and is driven out of the Father's presence and perishes in the darkness. That's the measure of his friendship. And you'll not find a friend like that anywhere else in all the world. He's not just willing to show you the way, but he's willing to become all of your missteps and to become all of your sins, to rescue you and redeem you. And so, Psalm 1 stands as a gateway, but also stands as a shepherd, the good shepherd saying, come to me. Let me absorb you into myself, taking all of your sins as my sins. That I might rescue you. and bring you safely all the way home, which is the last thing. To be happy, you must have the right rule for life, you must have the right source of life, you must have the right friend in life, but you must also reach the right end to life. Here, Kidner says, are the two ways, and there's no third, and they part forever. The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Oh, Jesus says, live leaning upon me. I'm the good shepherd who lays down his life for the flock. Don't spend your life striving after all of the things that don't really matter. I've come to save you from sin and I've come to save you from perishing. Follow me. Let your sins become mine, let my righteousness become yours, and you will stand in the way of the righteous. Live now with that thought of the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of your great Savior coming as you stand in the midst of that fray of unvarnished humanity when gone will be the brief strut of a little authority. And all human beings from the least to the greatest will be standing before Jesus. And he'll be separating them into the two groups and only two, those who are saved and those who are lost. And think of the day when Jesus will look at you and he'll say, I know you, I know you. I've known you since before the foundation of the world. I came into this world to save you. I lived the life you ought to have lived. I died the death

you ought to have died. Now enter into the joy of your
Lord. Keep that destination focused
in your mind. and you'll know the happiness
that none but Jesus' loved ones know. He knows the way of the
righteous. No better friend in life and
no better friend in death. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you,
oh Lord, for your mercy. We come before you and we pray,
Lord, for the congregation here this morning and this evening.
that you would draw near to them, draw near to us all each one,
oh Lord, and lead us in the truth and in the power of this psalm
as we enter in together to this book of experiential religion. Guide us to Jesus,
the good shepherd,
the door through which we enter into life and go in and out and
find pasture. We offer these prayers in Christ's
name, amen. Amen. Amen.