

The Psalmist's Look at "Sola Scriptura"

Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Psalm 1

*Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.*

On Reformation Sunday we remember that great revolution in the Church 500 years ago when basic Christian truths were rediscovered and the Church was rebuilt with a strong and biblical faith. This is the day when we commonly pause to explain the meaning of the great Reformation doctrines, most notably the "Only's" of the Reformation: Grace Only, Faith Only and Scripture Only. We rejoice that by grace only are we saved, and our right standing with God is all a gift and not to be earned by our alleged virtues. We affirm that faith is the only proper response to God's saving grace. We are saved by accepting God's gift of love by faith, and not by attempting to do enough good works to earn our way into the Kingdom. And then we celebrate Scripture Only—our affirmation of the Bible as the only sure and fully authoritative guide to truth. Church councils and traditions, pastors and priests may be helpful and are to be honored, but only the Bible has a full and final say on our beliefs.

Today I wanted us to consider Scripture Only, or in the Latin, *Sola Scriptura*, but I do not want to go into detail about the doctrine's definition. Rather than study it as a carefully defined doctrine, I want us to take more of a practical look at it. What does this belief in the Bible's absolute authority mean in one's daily living? In Psalm 1 we find the singer celebrating the joys and glory of living as a disciple, a student of God's Word, the Bible, and here we see the blessings to be realized by those who will accept *Sola Scriptura*, not only as a true teaching, but as a way of life.

This brief psalm begins by extolling the happy disciple of the law, and it reminds us of the choice which is before us. *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.* Happy is the person who chooses to *not* follow in the ways of the world. They ignore the misguided *advice* and *path* of this world and they are careful not to get too cozy with the wicked. In other words, happy is the person who does not thoughtlessly go along with the crowd. But if one does not follow the crowd, how is one to find the right path in life? The psalmist gladly tells of the path which leads to life and can be found by following the Bible.

The psalm uses the word *law*, and we do well to pause and define this law. In English we think of law only as a commandment or rule, but in the Hebrew Scriptures it has a much broader meaning. It can refer to a specific rule or requirement, but more often it means the Scriptures, particularly the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, also known as the Books of Moses. Why would one want to choose to follow the law? Is this the song of some "goodie two-shoes" who smugly wants to be right? The psalmist is very clear that following the Lord is wise in many ways. We ponder and follow the law, not only to do the right thing, but because there are countless benefits and joys in doing so.

The one who follows the law is first called the one who *delights* in it. Why such delight? It might seem that only a super-spiritual kind of person would *delight* in the law, but this is not so. There is plenty in the law which is totally delightful! Let us not forget that the Bible is an exciting and wondrous book. Consider our children and how they love being read Bible stories. This became one of my great joys in life, and while there were many evenings when I was so tired and tempted to send my kids to bed without story time, it was always a joy to share with them a few pages of God's Word. These stories captivated my boys. Why? Because they were true, and they told of good, of God's Son the Savior, and of life. Because God Himself was speaking to them through these stories, many of which the world would write off as silly! These stories have a wonderful attractiveness for more than just little children.

Each year I am thrilled to tell Bible stories at Vacation Bible School and to watch the youth *and* the adult leaders be moved by the truth of God's life-giving Word. I remember as a child and young man sitting through many a worship service and not feeling

particularly interested in all that was going on, until it came to the reading of the Scriptures. The worship service may have failed to gain my interest, but it always seemed that there was something beautiful about the Bible readings. The Bible is a fascinating and engaging book for all ages and its attractiveness is a testimony to its truth and relevance to our lives. The psalmist celebrated those who had discovered this treasure and he doesn't want us to be deprived of the experience! May we also remember that the Bible is of greater interest to outsiders than we commonly think.

We are told that the one who delights in the law also meditates upon it, and even does so day and night. That is a lot of meditating! First a word on meditation, which does not necessarily refer to any particular kind of altered state of thinking or some strange Eastern practice. This simply means to think about something. To think about the law day and night is a lot of meditating and it is easy to disregard this statement as wild exaggeration, but let us consider this a little further. Think for a moment of the smart-phone in your pocket or purse. How much of your day does this little device consume? We engage our phones at all hours of the day, and check our Facebook page on it in the middle of the night when we cannot sleep. They may take a long time to figure out and we are always learning new "apps" to install and utilize. This ongoing exploration may be challenging at times, but we keep on learning because it is so engaging! The psalmist wants us to rejoice in the law at all hours, just as we have come to delight in and explore the digital world in our day.

Our Gospel lesson (Matthew 22:34-40) gives us some insight into our Lord's meditating upon the law. He was asked what were the greatest commandments and he answered by quoting the commands recognized by Israel as of highest priority. We delight to see our Lord answer His critics correctly, but we fail to notice that Jesus was not trying to win a Sunday School contest. Jesus was showing us that his mind and heart were repeatedly engaged in a struggle to understand and apply these two commands to his life. What does it mean to truly love God with one's all, and to love one's neighbor? To what is this commandment calling us? Jesus wrestled with these questions, and as he meditated and sought God's will He found guidance for his life and ministry. How many times do we treat the commandments or a parable's lesson as little more than Church information to be stored on a dusty shelf of our minds? No, these truths are to be constantly engaged that we might learn and be guided into a path of life and obedience. The crowd is always trying to lead us in the broad and worldly path. How are we to keep from being drawn down this dead-end road? Such navigation can be challenging, but it begins with meditating upon the Bible, and as we seek, God delights to show us the way.

Having urged us to delight in and to meditate upon God's Word, the psalmist begins to extol the benefits of such seeking. First, he makes a bold promise of prosperity. *They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.* Yes, you heard correctly. He insists that *in all* they do they will prosper, even in the hardest of times. Most of us

would count ourselves a Bible following people. Do we believe that we are really *that* blessed? We may not always feel so blessed, but look around. With all the wealth, education, safety and comforts around us, how could we call ourselves anything but prosperous? It is always interesting to note that the nations of the world which are predominantly Christian, or at least have a large Christian population, are usually prosperous! God delights to bless those who follow His Word. And as we look at our children and our grandchildren succeeding in life, to what do we attribute this advancement. When attributing thanks to the authors of that success, do remember to include the Almighty!

When I think of the prosperity of the Christian, I usually find myself pondering the Amish and Mennonite communities. These are people of an obvious faith, and of an obvious prosperity. I have to laugh as from time to time there will be a television special, usually on public television, posing the anguished question: "Can the Amish survive in our modern world?" The world may look at the Amish as uneducated and simple innocents left to flounder in this dangerous place. Those who live around them know that they are a most intelligent people, particularly in the ways of God and His law, and this makes all the difference. Why do the Anabaptists, as we call them, prosper? The Protestant Work Ethic taught by the Bible sure helps, but the long and the short of it is that they honor God's Word and God therefore delights to give them success. What I find most pleasing about the Anabaptist communities is that they have a strong and joyful sense of God's providence. They rest secure in the Bible's affirmations that God has a plan and that all will be well, despite any troubles which may come their way.

How are we recognizing and celebrating our prosperity? I think we could all learn a thing or two from our Amish friends! In the middle of a pandemic we find ourselves so very susceptible to fear. Political campaigns play upon those fears, and with great success. God may protect and prosper us mightily over many years and crises, but we can still find so much to worry about! We need to heed the psalmist's sound counsel and spend a lot more time meditating upon God's law! The world teaches us to worry. Let us be diligent in seeking God's truth and finding power to overcome that fear. Let us replace the world's teaching of fear with God's Word's proclamation of faith!

To the promise of prosperity is added the gift of security. *For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.* We doubt and downplay our prosperity, and are even worse with our security. We become so aware of and frightened by all the world's troubles, even though we are well protected. Just a little study of history will make it clear that we are protected from so many illnesses, financial destitution, and all sorts of problems, such as no other nation or people has been, yet we worry and feel insecure. My great concern for this pandemic is that in just a matter of weeks a vaccine will be introduced and the news media will so succeed in tracking down stories of a few inoculations gone bad that they will throw the world into a panic. We don't act like a very secure people, watched over lovingly by our God,

but God has been good, and we all have stories to tell of answered prayers and God's deliverance. Let us meditate upon these and upon God's Word. Let us proclaim testimonies of God's goodness that the spirits of fear might flee from us.

The psalmist speaks of our being *watched over*, and this tells of more than just our protection. God hovers over us, and as we meditate upon the Bible, we find ourselves drawing nearer to God. We find ourselves in step with God, knowing God better and feel a harmony with the Almighty. *Sola Scriptura* is a doctrine which puts many of us ill at ease as we commonly confess that we "don't know our Bibles very well," and feel embarrassed by that ignorance, but don't waste any time or energy feeling guilty. Meditate upon the parts of the Bible that you *do* know and don't focus upon that which you do not know or understand. Just pick up your Bible and jump in. Scripture Only is not mere doctrine, but as the psalmist explains it, it is an invitation to delight, insight, wisdom, prosperity, security and harmony with God! It is a glad invitation to get those Bibles off the shelf!