

“The Two Ways”
Psalm 1
April 21, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

Someone asked me this week what our next sermon series was going to be. I answered, “Passages Brad wants to preach on during his final sermons at AVPC.” What draws me to Psalm 1 is the first word, the word “blessed.” All the commentaries agree that the sense of this word is accurately portrayed by our English word “Happy.” I didn’t choose this psalm because I want you to be happy *that* I’m leaving, but I do want you to be happy *in* our leaving and in all of life for that matter. Of far greater importance than my desire for your happiness is that God wants happiness for his people in all circumstances, and this psalm answers the question that really everyone is asking. “How can I be happy?” On a prayer walk a few years ago, the group I was with met someone on the street and asked if we could pray with him. When he agreed, we asked him how we could pray for him and he replied, “I just want to be happy.”

Though happiness is universally desired, it has proven to be quite elusive. You may have seen the results of the recently completed “Happiness Survey.” It ranks levels of happiness by both country and age group. In the most recent survey, America dropped to number 23 as a nation. Alarmingly, the sharpest drop in levels of happiness was among young people, a demographic formerly known as one of the happiest. We learn two very important things from the first word of this psalm. We learn first that God wants us to be happy. Second, we learn that the source of happiness comes from the life centered on God.

This second truth is seen in the fact that this is the opening word of the opening psalm of a book that is all about worship. The word “psalm” means song because this was Israel’s hymnbook. The newest of these hymns was written about 2500 years ago, and the most ancient about a thousand years prior to that. As such, this book contains the oldest hymns sung by God’s people. Many of these psalms have made it into our hymnbook, and we will be singing Psalm 1 at the conclusion of our service today. Of the 742 hymns in our hymnal, 267 of them, or about 36%, are either metrical versions of a particular psalm or an expansion of a verse or more from the psalms. Clearly, then, the book of Psalms is a book of worship, and the opening word in this book is the word “happiness.” Could it be that the failure to find happiness is nothing more than a failure in the area of worship? I would suggest to you that this is exactly the assertion of the Bible, and it is also the assertion of the God who wants happiness for his people.

The placement of this particular psalm as first is intentional. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner writes that it stands here as “a faithful

doorkeeper.” A doorkeeper decides who gets in and who gets excluded. If there is a place of happiness in this world, and there is, don’t you want to be in that place? This psalm clarifies who walks through that door leading into happiness and who never seems to find it, even if they search for it diligently. Happiness does come from the worship of the true God, and this opening psalm describes the only two paths that can be taken in life. One of them leads to the happiness of true worship, while the other collapses at the end.

I. The Way of the Happy Man – v. 1-3

The happy man is described first by what he doesn’t do. At first glance it may seem unusual to begin with a negative description, but I think the psalmist does this because it is the most obvious thing about him. He doesn’t just go along with the crowd and follow the common and easy path. If you want to find happiness, conventional wisdom will not be of help to you.

This happy man does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. The happy man is distinguished from the conventional wisdom man who just goes along with the crowd. What is this conventional wisdom man like? Notice the progression of these three phrases, as they describe a descent into greater evil. The three verbs—walking, standing and sitting—describe an increasing commitment to sin as this person departs from God in three degrees. First, he walks in the counsel of the wicked. It always starts in the mind, and this step describes the person who takes the advice of the wicked and embraces it. He buys into and agrees with the worldly perspective that says that happiness derives from a combination of accomplishments, possessions and beauty.

After adopting those values, he stands in the way of sinners. To stand in the way of someone doesn’t mean in Hebrew what it means in English. Rather than becoming an obstacle to someone, it refers to adopting someone else’s lifestyle. Just as the first phrase referred to one’s thinking, this one represents the more significant commitment of one’s behavior. The person has now acted on what he has thought in his mind, practicing the same behavior of sinners. There is a meaning this verb has in English that does apply here, and it’s the idea of convictions. When we ask, “Where do you stand on this issue,” we are asking about a person’s convictions. What are their non-negotiables? What red lines do they draw and refuse to cross? For those without God, that line is always moving.

Lastly and most fatally, he sits in the seat of the scoffer. A scoffer is one who is, in the biblical view, the farthest from repentance. He despises and ridicules spiritual things. He adopts a proud and cynical attitude toward

spiritual things, having completely lost any childlike wonder and playfulness in his heart.

Verse 2 turns to a positive direction and describes more of what is going on internally with this happy man. **“His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”** Since this is the main description of this man in a positive way, let’s spend a little time with it. Dallas Willard makes a helpful distinction about this verse. “He does not do this to please God but because the law pleases him.” Does the law of God please you? How can we grow in this area of finding God’s law delightful? There’s both a head answer and a heart answer.

Let’s start with the head. We must believe that God’s law is a statement of reality. Twenty-five years ago, in July of 1999, John F. Kennedy, Jr., son of the late President Kennedy, was killed along with his wife and sister-in-law when the single engine plane he was piloting crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the crash was “The pilot’s failure to maintain control of the airplane during a descent over water at night, which was a result of spatial disorientation.” I understand that it is possible for a pilot to lose his sense of the horizon, so that all his feelings tell him that he is maintaining altitude when he is actually in a sharp descent. In that situation, a pilot must learn to trust his instruments. If a crash is to be avoided, he or she must ignore feelings and do what feels very wrong simply because the instruments are telling a different story than the feelings. God’s law is like a pilot’s altimeter, showing reality.

There is also a heart answer to how we can learn to delight in God’s law, and that is to receive the law as a promise from a loving God. It is critical that we read God’s law with the right attitude. The first sin of the human race arose when Adam and Eve made the mistake of thinking that God’s command not to eat of the forbidden tree would diminish their lives. They were deceived into thinking that God was limiting their lives with this command rather than freeing their lives. They distrusted the nature of God. We can do the same by thinking that God’s law places on us unwanted obligations that will take away our enjoyment of life. Instead, we can read the law of God as promises from a good God who is describing what he is doing in our lives. God commands us to love him and to love our neighbor as ourself, and he is right now empowering us to do precisely that. Because of the goodness of God, we can read his law as a list of his gifts to us. He commands us not to fear, and one day he will certainly finish his work of delivering us from all fear. He commands truthfulness and forbids deception, and one day he will finish his work in our hearts and all falsehood will be as distasteful to us as eating dirt.

When we come to see God’s law in this way, we will want to meditate on it. What does it mean to meditate? Interestingly, the same word is used in the

very next psalm in a completely different context. Psalm 2:1 asks, **“Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain?”** That word “plot” is the same as our word “meditate,” only with a negative connotation. What does a person do when they plot? They turn something over in their minds in order to take some step. That teaches us something very important about meditation—it requires application. You cannot meditate on God’s word without applying it to your life. We often stop after we find God’s word interesting or informative, and we stop short of taking specific steps based on it. Delight in God requires going all the way through to the application of his word.

The next verse describes the happy outcome of the man who finds God’s law delightful. **“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.”** Notice several things about this happy outcome. First, the phrase “its leaf does not wither” assumes difficulties. Leaves wither in times of drought, but this tree has a source of water nearby. Some of you are in a time of challenge right now, a time when you may feel like a withering leaf. If so, let your roots sink more deeply into the refreshing water only God can supply. You have an unseen resource in the Spirit of God, the love of God and the promises of God.

Our changed life is likened here to fruit-bearing. The good works of our lives are not something we manufacture ourselves, but rather a result of dependence on God. Think about the wonder of fruit production. The ingredients that go into it seem outwardly to be incompatible with the outcome. How does sweet fruit come from such plain ingredients as dirt, water, sunlight, and time? It is wondrous, just like the fruit God produces in our lives. Out of the plainness of our lives, and even the suffering of our lives, God produces the sweet outcome of transformed lives.

One final truth can be seen from this metaphor, and that is the seasonality of it all. The fruit comes “in its season.” It takes time, and there are times when it feels like little is happening to us. Over the winter, Chilton County peaches require a certain number of chilling hours if the sweet summer fruit is to come. It looks like nothing is happening during those cold winter nights when actually a great deal is happening.

II. The Way of the Wicked – v. 4-6

We’ll be more brief on this point. I notice two significant differences between the description of the righteous in the first three verses and the wicked in these last three. The first is that the psalmist limits his description of the wicked to the outcome of his life. We read nothing of his choices or of his heart motivation, but only where his life ends. Perhaps the reason for this is simply

that the wicked merely follow the natural course of life. They never turn around and swim against the current like the blessed man of the first half of the psalm. Perhaps another reason is to shock the wicked to call out to God by a grasp of their peril. So he describes the outcome of their lives. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Chaff is the unwanted, dried up pieces of the wheat husk that blows away during the winnowing of the wheat. The wheat or other grain is first threshed, which was just a type of pulverizing that separates the grain from the husk. Then the entire mix is thrown into the air, and the heavier grain falls back to the ground while the lighter husk pieces are blown away, never to be seen again.

The wicked do reappear, and it's to stand before God on judgment day. On the most important day of all time, they cannot stand. They collapse under the weight of their sin and God's resulting judgment. Further, they have no place in the congregation of the righteous. Collapse and expulsion summarize the outcome of their lives.

The second change in the last half of the psalm is a change from singular to plural. "Blessed is *the man*," singular. Everything in the first three verses is singular, as if he is talking about one person. But in the last half, it changes to plural, referring to many wicked. Why the change? Could it be that the first half of the psalm is talking about just one man? Could it be that this is an Old Testament reference to the perfect man, our Lord Jesus. I believe it is. Who of us could be described as delighting in God's law to the point that we meditate day and night? Jesus could be described in that way. He is the one who has borne fruit through the dry times, and that fruit is salvation for any who will come to him. It is as we do so that we slowly become like him.

CONCLUSION:

I want to point out in closing that there are only two ways. This psalm is asking us to make a choice to follow this path of wisdom. It is the path that follows Jesus, the happy man who is the author of all happiness. The failure to choose to do so is to choose. You can't sit on the fence with this one. A fence has many useful purposes, but sitting on it is not one of them. If you have never made a choice to follow Jesus, will you do so now? If you have been following Jesus for many years, would you affirm in your heart that doing so is a path you are so thankful to have chosen. This is the ultimate doorkeeper to the rest of the psalms, to your happiness in this life, and to your eternal life.