

“HAPPINESS”

Psalm 1

What is happiness? Where is it found? How is it obtained? These are important questions, and people have asked them for millennia. Young or old, male or female, everyone wants to be happy.

Happiness is so important to Americans that we incorporated its pursuit into our Declaration of Independence: “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.”

Yet, as someone observed, having the right to pursue happiness is no guarantee of finding it. In a recent poll 70% of Americans surveyed expressed unhappiness with their lives. And according to the United Nations 2018 World Happiness Report, the United States with all of its resources, freedoms, and opportunities still ranked only eighteenth in global happiness, just ahead of the United Kingdom.

Of course, to measure happiness one must define it. But this is not easy. Most dictionaries and psychologists define happiness as a “subjective sense of well-being;” that is, a satisfaction with personal circumstances. The word happy itself is related to the words happen and happenstance. When good things happen, I’m happy. When bad things happen, I’m sad. The result is a happiness based on circumstances; happiness by coincidence, chance, or accident.

Likewise, many equate happiness with having. “If only I had, then I’d be happy.” How would you complete the sentence? “If only I had a new car, I’d be happy. If only I had a spacious mansion, I’d be happy. If only I had more money, fewer bills, better friends, nicer coworkers, and longer lunchbreaks, I’d be happy.” Would I? Perhaps for a brief while, at least until I required something more or something new to make me happy.

Of all the “if-only-I-hads,” what is more commonly associated with happiness than money? Yet, some things always remain beyond the golden reach of Visa, MasterCard, and American Express. And these un-buyable things are the most important things in life: love, forgiveness, salvation, joy, peace, contentment, and certainly happiness. As someone once said, “Money will buy you a bed, but not a good night’s sleep; a house, but not a home; a companion, but not a friend.”

Aristotle defined happiness as staying busy. Albert Einstein defined happiness as having a table, chair, bowl of fruit, and violin. “What else does a man need to be happy?” he asked. Albert Schweitzer defined happiness as “nothing more than good health and a bad memory.” And sounding strangely modern, Abraham Lincoln defined happiness as a state of mind, saying, “Most folks are about as happy as they want to be.”

But how does God define happiness? For a Christian this is the most important consideration. And thankfully, God speaks volumes about happiness in the Bible. However, the word He uses most often for happiness is blessedness. In Scripture to be blessed is to be happy, and to be happy is to be blessed.

The Hebrew word translated as “**blessed**” in Psalm 1:1, ASHER, also means happy, whole, sound, full, peaceful, and even prosperous. And throughout the Old Testament this Hebrew word, ASHER, only occurs in the plural—literally, ‘happiness-es.’ When God blesses and gives us happiness, he always does so in the plural; richly, abundantly, the cup that “**runs over**” of Psalm 23:5 and the “**abundantly above all that we ask or think**” of Ephesians 3:20.

Wherever this word ASHER occurs, if we substitute “happy” for “blessed,” we begin to understand how God defines happiness. Happiness is being **forgiven** by God, Psalm 32:1. Happiness is **trusting** in God, Psalm 34:8. Happiness is being **chosen** by God, Psalm 65:4. Happiness is **dwelling** in God’s house, Psalm 84:4. Happiness is **relying** on God’s strength, Psalm 84:5. Happiness is being **corrected** by God, Psalm 94:12. Happiness is **reverencing** God, Psalm 112:1. Happiness is **obeying** God, Psalm 119:1. Happiness is having God as **help** and **hope**, Psalm 146:5. All of these passages teach that happiness is found only in God and in aligning our will with His. This is the happy message of Psalm 1. Let’s consider that message and its life-changing principles about happiness.

First, God wants you to be happy. “Oh, I know that,” you may say. Yes, you may know it, but do you believe it? Do you live it? In your deepest troubles and darkest hours do you still insist, “God wants me to be happy?” Or do you secretly wonder if God is indifferent toward your happiness—or worse, if God is actively opposing your happiness? “If God cared about my happiness, He would have given THIS and prevented THAT.”

But have you ever considered that God did not give THIS or prevent THAT precisely because He wanted your happiness? Have you ever considered that God alone is committed to your happiness when the World, Satan, and Sinful Human Nature are not? God wants you to be happy. In a real sense He wrote this message in

the blood of His own Son, Jesus Christ, and nailed it to the cross. And the happiness God wants for you is not the cheap, bargain-brand happiness peddled by the world; rather, all the happiness, wholeness, soundness, and fullness of the biblical word “blessed.”

“Delight yourself in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart,” Psalm 37:4. Does this sound like God wants you to be miserable? Or Matthew 7:7, **“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”** Does this sound like God wants you to be miserable? Or John 15:11, **“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”** Does this sound like God wants you to be miserable? No. Understand then—I make this appeal to everyone who feels unhappy today—God wants you to be happy. And God will make you happy, if you trust in Him and follow His plan for your life. You have His word on it in Psalm 1.

Second, God’s promise of happiness is intended for everyone. There have been many times when I’ve looked at my life, thinking, “Well, I guess I was never meant to be happy. Look at me. I’m 65. I’ve reached the magic age of weekly doctor appointments and too many prescription refills. Friends my age are financially independent and retired. I’m not. Most are happily married. I’m not. Most travel extensively. I don’t. Apparently, God wanted them to be happy and me to be miserable.”

Yet, is there any way to reconcile such a gloomy, depressing outlook on life with the happy wisdom of Psalm 1? No. Such dismal outlooks and wrong conclusions result from failing to understand what true blessings are, and how freely God has blessed us in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 1:1 does not state ‘blessed is the rich man’ or ‘blessed is the Harvard man’ or ‘blessed is the wise man’ or ‘blessed is the well-dressed man’ or ‘well-educated man’ or ‘well-mannered man.’ It says **“blessed is the man”**—the Hebrew word refers to men and women—who follows God’s path to happiness. Follow it, and you will be happy.

Third, to find happiness you must be on the right path. And the right path is God’s path. The craving for happiness is universal; but the paths by which people pursue happiness are diverse. Some choose happiness through fame, fortune, power, possessions, or endless work hours away from their spouse and children, because they had to have that ‘whatever’ to be happy. Others pursue happiness in more self-destructive ways: illegal drugs, alcohol abuse, promiscuity, affairs, all kinds of excesses and addictions.

Yet, in the end there are but two ways to happiness; namely, God's Way and Man's Way. And every human pursuit of happiness falls into one of these two categories. Notice that in Psalm 1 there are only two ways to happiness: the godly way, verses 1-3; the ungodly way, verses 4-5; and in verse 6 the inevitable outcome of both ways. **"For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish."**

God wants you to be happy. But if today you feel unhappy and unfulfilled, shouldn't the first question be: "Do I know what true happiness is?" Shouldn't the second question be: "Do I know how blessed I am through my Savior, Jesus Christ?" And shouldn't the third question be: "Am I on the right path? Am I on the path God has chosen for me or the path of my own choosing?"

If you are on the right path, God's path, happiness will come. This is not a suggestion but a God-given guarantee. Psalm 1:1 states, **"Happy is the man."** It does not say, "The man might be happy." And while I could offer many Bible passages to support this Happiness Guarantee, consider the following two. Psalm 37:5, **"Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass."** Also Matthew 6:33, **"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."**

Can God's counsel in this matter be any clearer? Pursue happiness God's way and you will find it. Pursue happiness any other way—no matter how attractive, logical, or harmless that way may seem—and you will never find it. Never. Which path are you on today?

Fourth, being happy means a willingness to say "no" to that which is worldly and godless. Why does Psalm 1 describe what a happy man does NOT do before describing what a happy man does? Perhaps for the same reason that eight out of the Ten Commandments begin with "thou shalt not" instead of "thou shalt." The inclination of sinful human nature is to do the wrong thing and go the wrong way. And make no mistake, saying "no" to some things is as essential to godly happiness as saying "yes" to others.

Of course, saying "no" or depriving oneself of anything is viewed as absurd by the world. From the worldly perspective, saying "yes" to everything—gay marriage, marital unfaithfulness, sexual promiscuity, obscene talk and behavior, lying, cheating, betraying, gossiping, pornography—is the key to happiness. "Hey, whatever makes you happy man."

Philanthropist and media mogul Ted Turner was quoted as saying: “We are living under outdated rules. The rules we’re living under are the Ten Commandments. And I bet nobody even pays much attention to them because they’re too old. When Moses went up on the mountain, there were no nuclear weapons. There was no poverty. Today the Ten Commandments wouldn’t go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded. Commandments are out.” On that point, Turner was right. God’s commandments are out.

By contrast, Psalm 1 states that happiness also comes from saying “no” to that which is ungodly. **“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.”** Psalm 1:1. Said differently, taking bad advice, visiting bad places, and keeping bad company will never make you happy but bring you harm. God doesn’t say “no” to deprive you of happiness, but to ensure your happiness. You and I must learn to say “no” for the same reason.

And dear friends, it is nothing but self-deception to think, “Oh, what’s the big deal? It’s just a little sin. One time won’t hurt. Listening to one word of ungodly counsel; taking one step down the sinner’s well-worn path; sitting for one moment in the scorner’s seat won’t matter.” But such assumptions are dangerous and deadly. For as Psalm 1 indicates, almost imperceptibly, walking becomes standing; standing becomes sitting; sitting becomes staying; and staying on the path of the ungodly becomes perishing. Happiness requires saying no to that which is ungodly.

And finally, happiness comes from deep and daily meditation on the word of God. Still speaking of the source of a happy man’s happiness, the writer of Psalm 1 said, **“But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night,”** Psalm 1:2.

The Hebrew word for law in this verse, TORAH, means not only law as opposed to Gospel; but also the entire instruction of God’s word—both law and Gospel. The Hebrew word for meditates, HAGAH, is also a fascinating word. It literally means to study while mumbling; to muse while reading. The underlying thought is that of a deep contemplation instead of a casual reading; delighting in the word of God instead of being bored by it.

Frankly, I did a lot of HAGAH-ing while studying Psalm 1 and preparing this sermon. I read, pondered, mumbled to myself: “Now, what does that word mean? What is the Holy Spirit telling me about happiness? Aha! Now I see, Lord. And that reminds me of another verse I read in—“ On and on, link after link, one thought leading to another.

The deeper you dig into the Bible, the more divine treasure you'll unearth. The more treasure you unearth, the more blessed you are. The more blessed you are, the more happy you'll be. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he told that parable of a treasure buried in a field; and when he said in John 5:39, **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, and these are they which testify of Me.”**

One of my sons often struggles with feelings of unhappiness. We all do. But each time he shares his unhappy thoughts, I try to counter them with the happy facts of Scripture. “I know you feel unloved; but no one loves you more than God. I know you feel alone, but God is always with you. I know you feel broken, but God will heal you. I know you feel unwanted, but God chose you from all eternity to be His own. I know you feel like a failure, but God has redeemed, restored, and forgiven you through the sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ.”

At times, my constant use of Scripture exasperates my son. “Dad,” he says, shaking his head in wonderment, “you think Scripture is the answer to everything, don't you.” And I tell him, “Son, it's not that I think the Bible is the answer to everything. It's that God does.”

When we are deeply rooted in the word of God, we become that living, flourishing, well-watered tree of Psalm 1. Our hope does not wither. Our strength does not fail. Our efforts are not fruitless. Our happiness is no longer dictated by changing circumstances, but is ongoing despite circumstances.

What is happiness? Where does it come from? How is it obtained? The answer to all three questions is...God.