

LIKE A TREE

Psalm 1

Not long ago there was number one song that came out by Pharrell Williams called “*Happy*”. It was a song inviting people to be happy if they think happiness is the truth. It topped the charts in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and 19 other countries. It’s pretty clear people desire happiness. Even two people as ideologically far apart as Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis agree that happiness is a universal human pursuit.ⁱ That’s why we etched it into The Declaration of Independence. We consider the pursuit of happiness to be an inalienable right from our Creator God.

I think we long for it because it’s how we were created. Isaiah described the Garden of Eden as a happy place of flourishing, joy, gladness, thanksgiving and singing. The tragedy is that this happiness has been lost due to sin and many – rather, most – people today try find their happiness in places it won’t be found. Ask people what will make them happy and they might say owning some thing, making more money, marrying the right person, or if I only lived here or there or had this job. But happiness, as we’re going to discover today, *isn’t necessarily something that’s directly pursued but tags along as a result of pursuing something else – really, someone else*. We’re going to do that from Psalm 1 where we find a description of a happy man.

In the past, I’ve expressed my desire for us to study each type of psalm. There are psalms of lament, psalms of thanksgiving (praise), psalms of confidence (trust), divine kingship psalms, and psalms of wisdom. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm that’s been on my mind for a while. It’s one that the more I study it, the more I cherish it. I’ve had two people tell me in recent years that this is their favorite text in the Bible. And the more I study it, the more I see why. But what I also see now is it forms a unit with Psalm 2, so I’ll refer to it today as well.

I think we all adore the psalms because they teach us the instruction of the Lord in a way that relates to the inner human experience. At times they ring with confidence and praise, at times they hush our hearts and usher us into God’s presence, at times they make our hearts dance for joy, at times they make us examine ourselves, and at times we turn to them when we’re in tears to find comfort and hope. They are God’s storehouse of human experience for us to learn from and relate to, especially for the struggling soul.ⁱⁱ

Psalm 1 says,

*“How blessed [happy] is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law [instruction] of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.*

*He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season,*

*And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.*

*The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.”*

So again our focus is on the description of a happy man, but I want to sort of introduce us to this psalm a bit. In the Psalter there is no title or introduction for Psalm 1 or 2 like other psalms might have (though the NT indicates David at least wrote Psalm 2). But I think the introduction is left out because these two psalms basically form the introduction to the psalms. What you see in the first two psalms is like a taste sampler to the rest of the psalms.

 **Psalm 1 & 2 serve as the introduction to the entire Psalter.**

They have **similar phrases**.

Psalm 1 – *“the way of the wicked will **perish**”*

Psalm 2 near the end says – *“Kiss the Son [do homage to the Son] lest you **perish** in your way”*

In these 2 psalms there’s 2 similes, 2 characterizations, 2 progressions (wicked men and God’s judgment progresses), 2 meditations (righteous in God’s Word/wicked against God), and 2 destiny’s – blessing or perishing.

So **similar vocabulary/ideas being conveyed** throughout. And the key word that we desire to describe our lives is that word **blessed**. The 2 psalms are **bound by the word “blessed”**. Psalm 1 begins with it and Psalm 2 ends with it. Some Bible teachers call this an **inclusion**, meaning that all the material between is included into one. Blessed is like the bookends. It’s kind of like the Bible as a whole: It begins in *Genesis* with the *tree of life* and man kicked out of the Garden, but ends with man being redeemed and being restored to the *tree of life* in *Revelation*. Psalm 1 begins with **blessing** and ends in judgment, while Psalm 2 begins in judgment and ends with **blessing**.

There is a **chiastic structure** to the two psalms.

- A Blessing/True Happiness
- B Response to Instruction (righteous)
- C Judgement (end of Psalm 1 & beginning of Psalm 2)
- B Response to Instruction (wicked)
- A Blessing/True Happiness (in Christ, the Messiah)

By now you know what our English equivalent is for this word “blessed”. Some of your translations say “happy”. But I think it’s more than what we typically think of as happy. To help us understand it, let’s just look at some other uses in Psalms.

Psalm 32:1-2 – *“**Blessed** [happy] is the one whose transgression is **forgiven**, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”* I don’t know about you, but when I knew my sins were forgiven in Christ, I was happy!

It makes you want to jump for joy. One manager of a psychiatric hospital said if he could convince his patients of forgiveness, he could dismiss half of them at once.

Psalm 34:8 – “*Oh, **taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed [happy] is the man who takes refuge in Him!***” The blessed man has refuge, or safety, and delights in his sense of the Lord.

Psalm 65:4 – “***Blessed [happy] is the one you choose to bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple!***” The blessed one has satisfaction in being near to God, in His courts. He knows mercy and satisfaction.

We could look at more verses but that’s a taste of what it means to be blessed. It means to be truly happy, despite circumstances, because the happiness is rooted in God and satisfaction in Him.

 **Blessed = to be truly happy.**

It means full on the inside, just **satisfied in God**, knowing you have everything you need in Him. A deep contentment and inward prospering.

Now that we’ve defined what happiness is, **let’s look at four descriptions of a happy man.**

I. HE IS DESCRIBED BY WHAT HE DECLINES. (V. 1)

In the first few verses, you see **3 sets of 3 negatives**. Blessed is the man who...

does not walk in the *counsel* of the **wicked**,
nor stand in the *path* of **sinners**,
nor sit in the *seat* of **scoffers**.

Maybe this surprises as at first but sometimes a “no” is the first step to a “yes” of something better. Whenever you say yes to something, often times it includes saying no to something else. In order to say yes to my wife, I say no to everyone else. The athlete says no to desert in order to say yes to a gold medal. Sometimes we should say no to social media to say yes to our Bibles & prayer. You might even say no to something good to say yes to the best.

 **Sometimes a no is the first step to a yes of something better.**

This thought reminds me of a bottle of medication. The first thing you see are warnings: “*Do not take this if..., Do not take this with..., Do not take more than...,*” or else it will cause you more trouble. God’s Word is like that at times. It’ll tell us what things are self-destructive and keep us from being truly happy – things that world actually prescribes!

Remember Titus 2:11? “*For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men, **instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.***” If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Paul was reading Psalm 1 & 2 when he wrote that. Grace teaches us to say no to certain things.

It’s the same reason you tell your kids no. You know what will harm them and be a snare to them. We want to rescue them from the vain and vaporous things we chased as a result of listening and heeding the counsel of this world. That’s what this wisdom psalm is trying to prevent in us by giving us ears with selective hearing.

 **Wisdom comes with selective hearing.**

Some people listen to everyone, and some people listen to no one and try to live on their own. Both err. Through our intake of the Word of God, we develop a godly counsel filter through which we sift out everything we hear. In a crowd of voices, we hear God's voice.

II. HE IS DESCRIBED BY HOW HE DIFFERS. (VV. 4-6)

In verses 4 & 5 you start to see the **two characterizations** forming between **the righteous who seek God's counsel and are happy**, contrasted with **the wicked who go their own way and will perish**. This dual-characterization contrast is **a common technique of wisdom literature, motivating us to be among the wise**. You see this style as well in Proverbs or Jesus' teachings with the narrow gate and the broad gate, or with the man who built his house on the sand and the man who built his house on the rock. One foolish, one wise. The wise think long-term.



The wise live with eternity in mind.

They think about destiny, not just the here and now. You don't only live once – there's no such thing as YOLO. God has set eternity in our hearts and we all know it, and since eternity is long and this life brief, it only makes sense that we live with eternity in mind. That's going to dramatically effect how we live and operate if we consider that.

Notice the emphasis on the **progressive actions** of the man. There's a connection between **walk, stand, sit** and **counsel, path, seat**, and **wicked, sinners, scoffer**. As you meditate on this psalm, that will stand out and make you think about how they relate to one another. And I think it's clear there's a **downward progression** in each of these.

You start **listening** to worldly counsel and sort of testing it – **walking** in it. Then you go from walking to **standing**. You're done thinking twice. You're going to stay. It's your **path**. Then you take a **seat** and begin to **scoff**. So you start to take pride in your rebellious state. You listen to the wicked (in general), you become a sinner (committed), then a proud scoffer (bragging about it). You pull up a seat at the pride table. It's a slow fade from thinking about sin, to justifying it and being self-deceived, to mocking God's way.

What's really interesting is the **reverse progress of God's judgment** in Psalm 2. He sits and scoffs and laughs as they meditate about how to overthrow the rule of the Son, then speaking against them in anger, and it says he breaks them like clay pots in judgment. They **cannot stand** in the judgment so as to maintain their cause any longer. They perish. They are likened to chaff which blows away and comes to nothing, unlike the righteous man who differs – he is like a tree that flourishes.

But now let's look at the 3rd description of a happy man.

III. HE IS DESCRIBED BY WHAT HE DELIGHTS IN. (V. 2)

A lot of people think they're pretty spiritual for declining things – but what do they do that's positive? Religious people can deny all sorts of things but that doesn't mean they have a relationship with God on the inside. Their cold and rigid. But look at the happy man: By the grace and revelation of God in his life, the Bible is not drudgery, but delight. *“His delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law he meditates day and night.”* The righteous are blessed because they **delight** in the law of the Lord. If any of you have spent a significant, frustrating portion of your life living according to the world's counsel and then

came to Christ and have started living according to God's counsel, you know why he delights it!

Assuming David wrote Psalm 119, he cherished God's Word more than all the riches of the world combined. Picture an interview with David: "*Which would you rather have, David? All the riches in the world or the Word of God?*" David: "*The Word of God, any day!*" He knew the treasure of God's Word and we have even more than he did! And it's my prayer that all of us would have that same desire. That God would grant us that desire, that hunger, for God's Word because happy people are people are planted in it.

The way the word "**law**" is used here and other places like Proverbs 3:1, "*My son, do not forget my law [my torah, my teaching or instruction]*" I think this tells us we shouldn't only think of the Mosaic law. It is a word that can simply mean **instruction**. It likely refers to the revealed Word of God in its entirety – living your life in view of God's existence, His great story of redemption and your inclusion in it, and His clearly revealed will – all of His sure-footed commands, life-giving principles and hope-filling promises. The psalmist relishes the truths of being created by God, looking for a redeemer, having his sins forgiven, having God as a refuge, being satisfied in Him.

His delight is not just in externally complying with a list of commands but in really having a relationship with God through what God's Word teaches him about God.

 **Happy people get into the Word of God to get to know the God of the Word.**

He has delight in God's Word because he knows it's more than a rulebook. OT believers should've known God saves us by grace through faith (Gen. 15:6). David talks like that all the times in the psalms – how good and gracious and comforting and forgiving God is – **not because of what he does, but because of what God does and who God is.**

And you sense that the psalmist gets that because there is a **shift from outward actions** (walking, standing, sitting) **to the thought life** – to the heart and mind. We're not walking, standing or sitting, but **meditating**, which takes place in the heart and mind.

 **Meditation = engaging the mind on the truths of God's Word.**

When you see the word meditate, don't think of the transcendental meditation of *The Beatles* – emptying the mind. This is consciously engaging the mind and focusing it on revealed truth.

And the word has the idea of cooing. A low murmuring. Maybe the sound a cow makes while chewing cud - chewing on God's Word. It's not a man sitting cross-legged with an "*ohmmmm....*" but more like a man alone with God's Word, meditating on it, marking it up as he studies it, **memorizing** it to get the Word of God into – all day – day and night.

Memorizing was important for two reasons: 1) because they didn't have books or printing presses. They would memorize God's Word so they had it with them in their heart. 2)...

 **Mediation is the link between study and action.**

You can fly through the Bible but never consider ways to apply it. Think again of those passages we studied to define the word blessed. The psalmist is meditating on how he's forgiven, how he is satisfied in God, how good God is, how he's looking for the Messiah

in Psalm 2. That man is healthy spiritually, and as a result physically and emotionally. That Word is going to bear fruit in his life. It will root him and ground him through all seasons.

In verse 3, the happy man is described by what he depicts.

IV. **HE IS DESCRIBED BY WHAT HE DEPICTS. (V. 3)**

He is *like a tree, firmly planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season and doesn't wither, but prospers in whatever he does*. This is a delightful image. Who doesn't want to be like this tree? He's planted. Fruit-bearing. Enduring. Evergreen. It reminds of this giant cottonwood down in the State Park by the last frisbee golf hole. It's this massive tree that would take 3 men to get their arms around. It's planted right by the living water flowing down there. If we want to be like this tree, let's take note of what is said here.



The happy man is planted permanently.

"Firmly planted" it says. He has planted himself in God's Word which means he won't be easily uprooted. He is firm, a man of principle in a world where everything is relative. And he's **planted well** because he's *"by streams of water"*. Trees planted by water grow strong and quickly and mature. Reminds me of a row of trees at our farm. The one on the end in the low spot where rain water gathers is the tallest, healthiest tree. Men in the Word grow strong and mature. They see through the world's counsel.

But secondly because it leads him to Christ – the water of life. Scripture points to Christ.



True happiness is only found in Christ.

Jesus said whoever believes in Him will have **living waters** well up in him and if any man thirsts, He gives of the water of life freely. But it wasn't a new thing to say that. Psalm 36:7-9 says, *"How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light."* Isn't that great?

Happiness tags along as a result of pursuing Christ, not directly pursuing happiness.

Christ is the well that never runs dry that we tap into and the only way we will bear fruit and be productive. This psalm is not teaching that if we just do good things and not bad things, we'll go to heaven or that God accepts us. OT believers understood that we're saved by grace through faith (Gen. 15:6). We're all sinners and most of us have sat with the scoffers. The only reason the truly righteous can be live righteously is because Christ has set them free to live to righteousness. 1 Peter 2:24 – *"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."* It's through Him and His work that we can die to sin and live to righteousness by His Spirit who empowers us. Titus says, *"He gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works."* Because He has saved us, and we abide in Him, we can bear fruit.



The happy man is productive.

Not self-productive but productive **He is overflowing spiritually out of his relationship with Christ. He's abiding in Christ.** Colossians 2:6-7 says this, *"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."* **Roots are in Christ. Fruit is the result.**

But here's something else to think about: **Fruit is not for us.** It's for God's glory and to be a blessing to others. Fruit like watermelon is refreshing. When we are rooted in Christ and meditating on His word, we refresh others and refresh God by glorifying Him.

Lastly, because of Christ we will also prosper in whatever we do. He will succeed. Endure.



The happy man is prosperous.

They're **evergreen**, never withering. And I'll admit, this sounds a bit naïve, a little prosperity gospel-ish. If I was a prosperity preacher, I'd use this psalm to tell you that God wants you be healthy and wealthy in life and if you aren't, you're not putting enough money in the offering plate. That's not what this is saying.

For one, it's saying that if you decline the counsel of the world and live by the Word of God, you'll be better at life and it'll make life better in a lot of ways. You'll be a better husband, wife, father, mother, child, employee, business owner, wiser with money... all of that. God will bless your socks off. But it doesn't mean you'll always be healthy or wealthy.

Secondly, this prospering has an eternal focus. The righteous will stand in judgment and sit in the assembly of the righteous with God. They will amount to something. Even the droughts and storms of life add to their meaningful, eternal purpose. Romans 8 suggests we will prosper in anything we do. *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Tribulation? distress? persecution? famine? peril? sword? Being put to death as sheep to be slaughtered?* All of these things look like not-prospering. But he says, *"No, **in all these things** [distress, death, etc.] we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us."* Death itself can't even stop our prospering. In Christ, it causes us to prosper more.

"Oh death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Victory is ours, not death's! *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."* What's another way to say "not in vain" positively? Knowing that **your toil will prosper in the Lord.** We will prosper no matter what happens because of Christ, our Messiah, with whom we will live forever with in His kingdom. Everything will work for our good from God's hand.

Cross reference: Jeremiah 17:7-8

ⁱ Mark Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 63.

ⁱⁱ John Philipps, *Exploring the Psalms: Volume 1* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1985), 9