

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

PSALM 1 MARCH 1, 2020

In June of 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence. In the preamble Jefferson lists what he identified as three inalienable human rights: Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. His draft was then heavily edited and adjusted, shortened by a quarter. In fact, Jefferson commented that the committee had “mangled” his version.¹ But one phrase that survived throughout the process was “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Historians note that this list isn’t entirely original to Jefferson. John Locke had argued that God granted men the right to “life, health, liberty and *property*.”² Why had Jefferson made the switch from property to happiness? Some historians believe he got the idea from Scottish moral philosophers.³ No one is quite sure. More importantly, *what* did he and the rest of the Continental Congress mean by ‘happiness’ and how to pursue it? Jefferson never specified, but it was obviously important to the thinkers of the day.

Of course, the desire to be *happy* is natural. Not just for Americans, but for all people. You want to be happy. So do I. But what does that mean? How should it be defined? When you were a small child, it made you happy to splash in puddles and eat mud pies. I’m guessing most of our tastes have changed since then. But, as people who understand more about life and the world, as people who recognized that there is more to life than *this* life, more than our emotional feelings right now, are we even *supposed* to pursue happiness? Is that compatible with a life lived for the glory of God?

You’ve probably heard the phrase “God doesn’t want you to be *happy*, He wants you to be *holy*” before. You may have even heard it here. And, in the normal, emotional *feelings* sense, there’s some truth to that. The great purpose of your life is *not* that you *feel* the way you want to feel at any given moment. But, the fact of the matter is that God *does* want you to be happy. There are more passages than we have time to go through that talk about God’s intention for our joy and our fulfillment and for abundant satisfaction. It’s happiness God’s way.

Unlike Jefferson or John Locke, God has carefully described and defined what real, Godly happiness is all about. And it’s much more than a fleeting feeling. It’s more than a passing fancy. Heaven’s happiness is presented as the most important thing you *could* pursue with your life. In fact, at the beginning of the book Psalms, this incredibly personal and devotional and essential book, we’re given God’s truth about the pursuit of happiness. Psalm 1 is all about happiness God’s way and it is presented as a matter of life and death, covering our day to day experience all the way through to the end of human history.

Now, maybe you find yourself in a time of great personal difficulty. Maybe this talk about happiness is making you think, “I don’t have time for happy thoughts. I’m just trying to get by. I’m just trying to survive.” God’s word says today that your ultimate survival is *exactly* what Psalm 1 is talking about and that our Lord intends much more for you than just getting by as you live out life.

This is a very significant Psalm. Scholars agree that it serves as a preface to the rest of the Psalter. They point out that, in some of the ancient manuscripts, it’s not numbered, but presented as an

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence#Draft_and_adoption

² <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/emotions/pursuit-of-happiness-meaning1.htm>

³ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/interactives/declaration-of-independence/pursuit/index.html>

introduction to the songs that follow.⁴ Charles Spurgeon said all the other Psalms serve as the *sermon* describing what is revealed in the *text* of Psalm 1.⁵

As a text, it has echoes and parallels in the Parables, the Sermon on the Mount and other parts of the New Testament. In 6 short verses it delivers to us a powerfully concentrated dose of guidance and truth, showing the way to a vibrant, meaningful, happy life. The first verse, the first phrase of this remarkable book of the Bible is:

Psalm 1:1a - How happy is the man...

Happy. Blessed. Envidable. Highly favored. This opening line is loaded with implications for us. As Bible students we would call this a “beatitude.” What follows is God’s revelation of the supreme ideal for your life. A state of fulfillment that is well beyond splashing in mud puddles.

You see, when humans do the defining of happiness, it’s completely subjective. One person might define happiness as being wealthy. Another person might define it as being loved. Another might define it as feeling good all the time. Which is it? God, the *Creator*, says that *this* is it. And it’s His definition that matters. Notice how He says it: “Happy *IS* the man.” Not, “how potentially happy a person could possibly be.” The Holy Spirit presents this to us as a statement of fact.⁶ Most of you are very familiar with this text, maybe even have it memorized. But, from the outset, it’s saying: If you are a believer who will go God’s way, *this* is the ramification and the result. This is how God has designed the Christian life.

We’re conditioned to be wary of get rich quick schemes or sales pitches that seem too good to be true. But God is on record here as providing the way for you to have a truly happy life. That should arrest our attention. If someone came to you and said, “I’ve got the map that leads to El Dorado, the city of gold.” And if you believed they were telling you the truth, wouldn’t you act on it? Of course we would. And here, Psalm 1 lays out a map to everlasting treasure right before us.

Now, the fact that this Psalm gives us the roadmap to real happiness in life indicates that *we don’t know the way ourselves*. This is truth that we won’t just stumble upon accidentally. We needed a God of grace to reveal it to us and instruct us in the way. The question is: Do you believe that God knows better than you? Does God know better about your future? If the answer is yes, then we’ve got to go *His* way, rather than our own. And His way has to be revealed.

As verse 1 continues, it begins describing Godly happiness and it does so by telling us what it’s *not*. This isn’t that unusual. If I were to ask you to describe what it means to be healthy, one of the first things you’d probably say is, “Not being sick.” Here’s how the verse goes on:

Psalm 1:1 - ¹ How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers!

The Bible makes it clear that there are only two paths in life. There is God’s way and there is the *other* way. Religions like Buddhism try to imagine “the middle way.” Right now in politics there’s a lot of argument about whether the country should go right or left or center. But, when it comes to salvation, there is no third route. One way or another.

⁴ J.J. Stewart Perowne *Psalms*

⁵ James Montgomery Voice *Psalms Volume 1*

⁶ Perowne

While we can detect a downward progression in this verse - your translation may show it plainly as walking then standing then sitting - I was struck by the general bombardment of ungodliness confronting the happy person. If you put yourself in the Psalm, you've set out in pursuit of happiness, and immediately you've got the enemies of God standing in your way, giving you advice, flooding the airwaves with their philosophies and their scorn. But, like health is the absence of sickness, we see here that Godly happiness is to be free from the influence and mindset of those opposed to the Lord. And it's not just talking about Christ-hating atheists who make it their mission to mock our Savior. The Bible explains that if a person or a system or a philosophy is not submitted to *God's way*, then it is going the *opposite way*. But they're inviting you to come along, to join them on their yellow-brick road. To be a part of their party. But this Psalm and many other passages of Scripture explain that the way they're going leads to ruin.

Rather, the happy person follows the path laid out by verse 2.

Psalm 1:2 - ²But his delight *is* in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night.

Christianity is much more than just *not* doing certain things. It is an active life that engages the mind, the heart, the body, our skills, our time, our resources.

The Psalm says that a happy person is characterized by a love for the Word of God. Commentators argue over whether the immediate meaning was the Torah, or whether the Psalmist meant the book of Psalms itself, others say it's the whole Old Testament. We don't know when exactly this song was written, but there's no need to debate. Because God's Word is unified. It's complete and in harmony with itself. All of the Bible fits together. And now, of course, along with the written word, we have the *Living Word*, Jesus Christ. *The Word*, Who put on flesh and came and dwelled with us.

Psalm 1 explains that people who have laid hold of Heaven's happiness are people who love Jesus Christ and love the Scripture. We're told that the Bible has been given to us as instruction for life and Godliness. Usually people don't get really excited about the release of a new instructional guide. When the seventh and final *Harry Potter* novel was released in 2007 people waited in long lines to get a copy. One young fan was interviewed by the *New York Times* after camping out in Piccadilly Circus to get her copy. She said, "I slept three hours in the last two days in the rain," but then said she was going to have to read a chapter before she went to sleep.⁷ *That's* delight and excitement. People don't usually behave like that when it comes to the Ikea instructions for putting together their new table. So how can our Psalmist talk about *delighting* in God's instruction book?

Though God's Word *is* given for our instruction, it's much more than just a reference manual or a pile of information. It's a whole library of truth and life-changing secrets. It contains real wisdom. It stirs us up with adventure. It professes God's love to us. It explains the mysteries of the world. It provides perspective to make sense of everything around us. It teaches us. Comforts us. Corrects us. Prepares us. It sets before us a delightful feast to enjoy as long as we live.

When the Bible describes what our relationship to it is meant to be it uses really intense images. Like how we are to "write it on our hearts." Or that man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word of God. That sort of intensity is repeated here as we see God's Word being a *delight* to the happy man.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/21/books/21pott.html>

Psalm 119 is all about our relationship to the Scriptures. Here are a few selected phrases from that song:

Psalm 119:35, 47, 92 - ³⁵ Make me walk along the path of your commands, for that is where my happiness is found...⁴⁷ How I delight in your commands! How I love them!...⁹² If your instructions hadn't sustained me with joy, I would have died in my misery.

Here in verse 2 it's explained that we're not just to *appreciate* God's word, but we're to *apply* it.

The Living Bible paraphrase renders the second half of the verse this way: "Night and day [they] are always meditating on [God's] laws and thinking about ways to follow Him more closely."

In the happy life, God's Word has *replaced* the guidance, the advice, the mindset of the unbelieving world. Which includes our *own* thoughts, ideas, plans and opinions *before* we were Christians.

If, at this point, you think to yourself, "I don't *delight* in the Bible. I'm not even hungry for it." I understand. But when we detect that attitude in ourselves, it's a sign of a problem. The fix is to remove influences that crowd out the airspace in your mind and to simply go to the Word and see what it says. On a practical level, it might help to switch to another good translation for awhile. It might help to switch to *listening* to the Bible sometimes instead of just reading it silently. The delight in the Word is *essential* to Godly happiness. It's essential to knowing how to make decisions and how to navigate relationships and whether God wants you to go one way or another.

Verse 3 describes how going God's way, in delight of His Word, impacts a person's life.

Psalm 1:3 - ³ He is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

The image of a tree is wonderful and illuminating. God's plan is to make you like a great tree. Not a statue, rigid and motionless. But a tree. Strong. Growing. Beautiful. Useful. Fruitful.

Not a *random* tree, isolated in some haphazard place. But a tree that's been specifically planted in a particular location for a purpose. And that purpose is *fruit*. Fruit trees are so remarkable when you think about it. But a tree doesn't enjoy it's own fruit. In fact, you've got to get that fruit *off* the tree. Fruit is for *others*. It's for the farmer. It's for the people who take it from the branches. Now, fruit, in spiritual terms, can mean a variety of things. Sometimes in the Bible it refers to the future rewards we will receive in eternity. More often it's referring to spiritual growth in your life and ways you glorify God. Or ways you serve others using the gifts God has given you. All around, according to the Bible, there are *so many ways* you can be bearing fruit in your life. Glorifying God. Observable progress in becoming more like Jesus Christ. Serving the Church. If you're a Christian here this morning, take a look at your branches. Is there fruit growing? It's an important question because lack of fruit production is the sign of a spiritual problem. It would kind of be like waking up tomorrow with no vision in one of your eyes. You probably wouldn't just go about your day. You'd take it seriously, get it checked out and figure out what you needed to do to restore the proper function of your eye.

Bearing fruit isn't just something God *wants* for your life, He expects it. And whether it was the nation of Israel or the letters to the churches in Revelation, when Jesus came to inspect the trees and didn't find Godly fruit, He wasn't happy. In John 15 Jesus said that the Father "cuts off every branch that doesn't produce fruit" and that if we remain in Him, we "*will* produce much fruit."

Not only is the Godly, happy life fruitful, it's evergreen. Whether in the storms of winter, the terrible heat of summer, the cool of spring or the mild of autumn, our leaf will not wither. This tree isn't subject to the weather around it but by the inexhaustible supply of God's presence and power.

Psalm 1:4 - ⁴ The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Think of a beautiful, 20 foot pear tree. Rock solid and stable. Then think of the skin that comes off a peanut. That's the difference as far as heaven is concerned. Now, many of the Psalms wrestle with the fact that, from *our* vantage point, so often it seems like the wicked get everything they want. They have the strength. They often have wealth and power and prominence. But we're always encouraged to remember *their* end and the beginning of the Psalms where we see them for what they really are. Oh The Great And Powerful *seemed* so impressive and important until the curtain was pulled back. And here, the Lord reveals the true reality of the way of the wicked. The wind, which for the tree will carry off seed and fragrance, will utterly eliminate the wicked.

What does it mean to be "wicked" as far as the Bible is concerned? For us, that's a strong word, reserved for particularly evil people. But in Biblical terms the wicked are simply all those who do not know and are not known by God. In the context of our passage, it is all those people who are on their *own* way rather than going God's way, as revealed in the Bible. The Bible Knowledge Commentary says it this way: "*People described [as wicked] are not in covenant relationship with God. They live according to their own passions. They may do kind and charitable deeds, but God's evaluation of them is that they are without eternal merit.*"

What about you today? Are you in relationship with God? Have you been born again by believing on Jesus Christ and repenting of your sins? You see, *everyone* is born in sin. Everyone is wicked. There is none righteous, no not *one*. But when you turn to God and receive His salvation He *gives* you His righteousness. He *makes* you the happy person Psalm 1 is describing. If you haven't received that salvation, you're not in verse 2 and 3. You're in verse 4 and 5.

Psalm 1:5 - ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not survive the judgment, and sinners will not be in the community of the righteous.

What we're talking about here is not just theoretical. It's not just a thought experiment. It's not just a dream someone has of a good life. We're talking about a real course for your life that is going to end one day. And, if you are not in Christ, your road will end in what is called here "the judgment." You will not survive. You will be lost. Ruined. Your version might read that the wicked "will not stand" in the judgment. That's because there, before the Great White Throne, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But, by then, it will be too late for salvation. There the wicked will be judged and sentenced and sent forever into the lake of fire. No pardons. No time off for good behavior. No appeals. You will face the crushing wrath of God's judgment.

That's not what God wants for you. We know so because He says so directly. He's not willing that *any* should perish but that *all* would come to repentance. He inspired *this song* so that we could know the difference between the two roads. One leading to a happily life now and forever, the other leading to ruin and death. And you are free to select either way.

It's interesting: the Psalm opens with the wicked trying to convince a person to come along with them on their path. We see where that path ends. But we also see where God's way leads. At the

end of the line there is an *assembly* of the righteous, whose lives have been saved and made beautiful by God's power. The question for each believer here today is: Who are we bringing with us? Will we pass through the gates of heaven *alone* or will we add more than just us to the community of the righteous? We can't force people to believe, that's not our responsibility. But we've been planted in a specific time and place by God so that we can influence people, spread the Gospel and be a part of God's life saving work on the earth.

Psalm 1:6 - ⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

This Psalm has the day-to-day in mind and the long view. It covers your life from this morning on through to eternity. Along the way, we are assured that a caring, loving God is watching us. Not passively but as a Counselor, a Friend, a Yokefellow, our Bridegroom and as Judge.

The Lord is watching because your life matters. And so He has provided everything necessary for each one of us to avoid ruin, find fulfillment, and bring others with us as we walk in heavenly happiness.

What does it mean to pursue happiness? Psalm 1 defines it as a person, going God's way, applying the Word to their lives and, as a result, growing, strengthening, and blessing others.

The happy life of Psalm 1 is not defined by personal selfishness or emotional feelings. Rather, it's all about the Father, our fruit and our future.