



Happiness is like a Tree

Psalm 1

Ken Lippold

5 July 2020

illustration: A few years ago, Emmy and I went to see Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in the West End...

The passage we're looking at today is Psalm 1. And Psalm 1 is like an overture.

It's an overture for the entire book of Psalms. The themes in Psalm 1 are the same themes that are repeated throughout the Psalms: the righteous, the wicked, the Word of God. And in a way, it's like an overture for the entire Bible.

You see, the writers of the Psalms didn't write these poems and songs in a vacuum. They didn't just sit down and come up with these ideas on their own—what they're doing is meditating on God's word—they're meditating on the Bible and the Psalms are their reflections on what they find in God's word.

And so Psalm 1 is really a meditation on what happens if a person does this too. What happens to a person if they spend their life meditating on God's Word.

What kind of person do they become? What happens to them?

And Psalm 1 functions like an overture, it's leading you to soak in the sounds and smells. To take into you—deep into you—the sounds and smells of this book.

And if you do, look what happens...

Did you notice the very first word this Psalm. Which means it's not only the first word of Psalm 1, but the first word of all the Psalms?...Take another look...

text: Psalm 1.1a - Blessed is the one

That word blessed means happy, it means fulfilled, joyful, it's a picture of someone who is flourishing.

The book of Psalms begins by making a statement. Here's the statement: it *is* possible to be happy—to flourish. If you enter into this book—into God's Word—and take it into your life, you'll be blessed.

But deep down, do you really believe that? Do you really believe it's possible to be happy, to flourish? Just think for a minute about all that gets in the way of happiness—all that gets in the way of flourishing?

Living through a Pandemic means at worst someone you love may have died or you might die. At best means an inconvenience to your day-to-day life; and in between those two extremes are all sorts of canceled plans for weddings and holidays and maybe the loss of a job.

Not only that, but we've also been over the past month—rightly—confronted with systemic racism and how taking part in it destroys the ability for someone to flourish because of the color of their skin.

But perhaps on a more basic level for you it's sickness, job loss, loneliness, strained or broken relationships, strong-willed children, mental illness. These things, or these types of things, are always going on around us or inside of us.

So, how's it possible to be blessed, to be happy, to flourish if it seems everything is stacked against us?

Well, the Psalmist is going to show us. And to do it, the Psalmist takes us to meditate at three places: he takes us to the Road, to the River and to the Courthouse.

In each place, the road, the river and the courthouse, the Psalmist shows us where it is we try to find our happiness but always fall short. But in each place he gives us an alternative, a way to live, that if we find it, if we walk along it we will be blessed, we will be happy, we will flourish both in this life and the next.

So, let's go first to the road.

1. The Road [1-2]

text: Psalm 1.1-2 - 1 Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
 2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.

In verse 1 we meet this person along the road. And it's as if they've come to a fork in the road. One road has a sign that says "happiness this way" and the other says "righteousness this way."

Well, what do you choose? Do I want happiness or do I want righteousness? It seems like you can't have both. You're either happy and wicked or righteous and unhappy.

And this is actually a hard choice for us today. Even if you believe deeply that righteousness is the right path, every voice in our culture says that in the end, you have to do what makes you happy. Happiness trumps righteousness. Happiness is what life is all about. So *if* you're faced with a hard choice, chose the one that makes you happy.

That is a core narrative of western culture.

But, notice the Psalmist says that's not the way to happiness. Blessed is the person who does NOT walk in step with the wicked, who does NOT stand in the way that sinners take, who does NOT sit in the company of mockers.

Do you see what happens if you walk down that road? There's three verbs there: walk, stand and sit. Walk has to do with your behaviour—it has to do with your habits, your lifestyle. If you make happiness your chief aim you'll be walking in step with the wicked—that will become your lifestyle—if happiness is your chief aim you'll make all kinds of decisions you never thought you'd make.

Then to stand means to take a stand for something, you'll actually become like an advocate, and then lastly to sit...

In ancient Hebrew where you sit is where you belong, where you sit becomes your central identity. And look where this road leads, you sit in the company of mockers. You become a mocker. This word is much stronger than mocking your friend's pandemic hair. It means you will become the kind of person who can never see the good in anything. Always finding something to complain about.

If you walk down this road. If you make happiness your chief aim, all happiness is stripped away and you can no longer see the good in anything.

But, there's another road, look again at verse 2...

text: Psalm 1.1-2 -1 Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.

Now, remember this word "blessed" is important. It's the first word in the book of Psalms, and if we trace that word throughout the entire Bible, a principle begins to emerge, and here it is: blessedness can never be gotten directly.

Happiness is never gotten by pursuing happiness —it's always and only a byproduct of pursuing something else more than happiness.

This phrase we see here in verse one—"blessed is the one"—is all over the Bible. But it never says: "blessed is the one who pursues blessing", "blessed is the one who hungers and thirsts after blessedness." It never says that. Instead it says things like Psalm 1 verse 2 "Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the Lord". Or in Psalm 94 verse 12: "Blessed is the one you discipline, Lord." Or in Matthew 5 verse 6: "6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

In the Bible, those who are blessed—those who are happy, those who are flourishing, filled—their main pursuit is not blessing, they don't pursue happiness, it's always something else. But blessedness—happiness—flourishing is always the byproduct.

Just look more closely here at verse 2. What does it say? It says the blessed person's *delight* is in the law of the Lord. "Delight", that's a happiness word, and look what the blessed person delights in: the law of the Lord. Delight is the byproduct.

Now, when you and I hear "law of the Lord" we immediately think "rules". Do's and don'ts. And certainly it includes that, but the Psalmist has in mind all of God's Word. "Law of the Lord" is shorthand for the message of the whole Bible—which is God's story of how he redeems humanity.

You see, it's through God's word that we get to know God. He has chosen to reveal himself to us primarily through his word. And it's when you delight in that Word, when you pursue God through that word, that you become blessed—you delight.

And how do you get that delight? Look at the second half of verse 2, by meditating on it day and night...And meditating doesn't mean going off and becoming some sort of monk or nun living in a monastery or convent where you do nothing but pray and read the Bible. The kind of mediation the Bible has in mind is explained in Deuteronomy 6. What are we supposed to do with the Word of God?

text: Deuteronomy 6.6-7 - 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

To meditate on God's word is to have it on your heart, and to talk about it with your children and to talk about it when you're at home and when you're out and about, to talk about it when you lie down to bed at night and when you wake up first thing in the morning.

The one who does that is the one who is blessed, the one who finds delight.

So here we are standing at the fork in the road: seek happiness or seek righteousness? If you seek righteousness more than happiness, you'll get both. If you seek happiness more than righteousness, you'll get neither.

Let me try and illustrate this for you, and because this is my last sermon as a pastor of your church, I thought I needed to fit in a cycling illustration for you.

illustration: maps...

You see, if we sought comfort, if we sought happiness, who knows where we would have ended up!

Instead, we followed the map, we meditated on it mile by mile, we studied it every night before bed to make sure we knew the route, we studied it

again in the morning to make sure we started out in the right direction. We followed it turn by turn.

And because we did that, we went down (and in many cases, up) a lot of hard roads, steep roads, gravel roads, narrow roads, windy roads. But in the end we got to the exact location we set out towards on day one.

Now, here's a photo of the exact moment we arrived.

And what you'll see in this photo is blessedness—happiness, delight. It was in this exact moment that every single denial of comfort along the road to follow the map was worth it.

This is what it looks like to be blessed, to be happy, to flourish. If we focused on happiness we would have never gotten it. And what the psalmist is showing us is that denial of self, pursuing something greater than happiness is how you get happiness.

Ok, so, the Road, that's one place we try and find blessing, but let's go now to the next place the Psalmist wants us to mediate, the River...

2. The River [3-4]

And the second way we try and find happiness, we'll see at the river, is through our circumstances.

Take another look, verse 3...

text: Psalm 1.3-4 - 3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.
4 Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.

Again, we've got a contrast, only this time, it's not two roads, but a contrast between a deeply rooted, fruitful tree; and the chaff. The chaff are the weightless, dead husks that just get blown away by the wind.

Let's think first about verse 4...

Here we have the wicked again, and what does it say they're like. They're like chaff.

Chaff the ultimate picture of what is rootless, of what is weightless. It's so light that all it takes is a slight breeze and it's blown away.

What is the wind? The wind is a circumstance, a situation. You have no control over it.

illustration: storm a couple weeks ago...We had no control over that storm. It was a circumstance, whatever was going to happen was going to happen.

That's the image here of the wind. It's a circumstance that you have no control over.

So, what happens to the rootless, weightless person when the wind blows? They're blown away...

So, what's the alternative? Well, it's to be like a tree...Back to verse 3...

text: Psalm 1.3 - That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

I want you to see this because, notice, the tree is subject to seasons. Which means, it too, is subject to circumstances...It's subject to a freezing cold winter and a dry, hot summer.

It's not always bearing fruit, it does it in its season. And when it says the leaf doesn't wither, it's not saying that the tree has luscious green leaves **even** in winter, even in a drought. It's not saying that. It's talking **about** a drought. When the harsh summer sun dries up everything else, when the circumstances are terrible, this tree has leaves that don't wither up and die.

Why? What's the difference with this tree. Why does the psalmist say this tree always prospers?

It has to do with where it's planted. It's planted by the stream. The word there for planted is actually 'transplanted'. This tree has been moved and planted by the stream.

So, here you have a tree that just like the chaff, is subject to circumstances, it's subject to the wind, it's subject to drought, subject to seasons, and yet it always prospers.

The difference is that it's planted by the stream. A stream that's there even when the heat comes.

What's the point?

Happiness can't be found in circumstances.

No matter how hard you try to build up the best possible circumstances for your life, you can't control them. Viruses come—the wind comes and blows the good circumstances you built for yourself away.

I saw an article last week about the CEO of Airbnb where he was talking about the impact of Covid. Airbnb is an incredibly profitable company. It took them 12 years to build a global brand worth billions of dollars. And here's what the CEO said this week:

"It took us 12 years to build Airbnb, and we lost almost everything in four to six weeks."

You can't control circumstances. No matter how hard you try, the wind will blow. You can't control circumstances, but you can still bear fruit in your life. Real blessedness, real happiness is not based on circumstances, but by being transplanted near the stream.

That's the thing about being a Christian, Christians are transplanted people. The Bible consistently tells us that a Christian is not fundamentally a good person on their own—they're not fruit bearing on their own. A Christian is someone who has been transplanted and rooted into something beside him or herself. A Christian is transplanted into Christ. He's the stream, and when we're rooted in him, **then** we bear fruit, **then** we can endure any circumstances and still be blessed.

But don't miss this. This is not saying a Christian is someone who is immune from difficult circumstances. This text does not say, become a Christian and your life will be easy. It says the opposite. A Christian is just as vulnerable to circumstances as anyone else. The seasons still come, the wind still blows.

Which means when we're going through seasons of dryness, when we're going through seasons of drought—when our circumstances are stacked up against us and have seemingly stripped everything away—it means we have to draw strength from our roots—from what—from who—we're rooted in. We need to grow roots even deeper down and draw strength from the stream.

And that, by the way, is what we should be telling one another when we see each other struggle through difficult circumstances, not smile, but dig deeper into Christ; and in him you'll find more blessing than you ever imagined.

Now, there's one more place the Psalmist wants to take us: the courthouse. It's in the courthouse that we will see how we become transplanted, how we can put our roots down into Christ.

And what we're going to see is that when you're rooted in Christ, you can stand up in the courthouse. Let's take a look...

3. The Courthouse [5-6]

illustration: Now, only once in my life have I had to stand before a judge. Now, just to put you all at ease, it wasn't for anything big or heinous, just a traffic violation, but it was a big enough one that I was called into the courthouse and had to stand before the judge and make my plea.

The night before, I sat down to think about how I would plea not guilty and instead make my case. I had all these arguments about how I was wrongfully pulled over by the police and how they were taking into account my circumstances—basically, I had an argument that wouldn't even stand the scrutiny of a bad courtroom tv drama.

But the truth was...I was guilty.

And verse 5 reads with all the tension of the morning I showed up at the DeKalb County Courthouse to make my plea...here comes the accused, he's walked in step with the wicked, stood in the way of sinners, sat in the company of mockers, and now he's made his way into the courtroom, ready to make his case, verse 5...

text: Psalm 1.5 - Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

The person who has walked in step with the wicked—the one who has pursued happiness as his chief aim—doesn't have a leg to stand on.

And neither did I on that day in the courthouse—I knew I had no leg to stand on. When I came and stood before the judge, my own sense of unrighteousness in regard to the law overwhelmed me. And when the judge asked for my plea, I dropped my plans to argue my case and I pled guilty.

That's the sense here in verse 5, the Psalmist is talking about legal standing, the person who has walked in step with the wicked has no legal case to make. All his unrighteousness is stacked up against him—he has no standing.

Now remember, Psalm 1 is a meditation on all of God's Word—and what we would learn if we took the time to meditate on all of God's word is this: none of us can stand. All of us start out life already walking in step with the wicked.

Which means, no one can stand up in the courtroom. Later on in Psalm 24 it says: Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

But of course none of us has clean hands or a pure heart. Any time you've put your own happiness before the needs of someone else. Any time you've thought selfish thoughts, done selfish things, uttered selfish words you've dirtied your hands and revealed the impurity of your heart. So, none of us can stand in the courtroom. And because of that, we're all on the road that leads to destruction.

But there is another road. It's the other way—the other road—mentioned here in verse 6.

text: Psalm 1.6 - For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Now, notice the contrast with verse 1. Verse 1: Blessed...blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked. And here in verse 6, "destroyed". Destroyed is the one who walks in step with the wicked.

Two roads, one leads to blessing and the other leads to destruction.

How do you get on that road? Well, we've already seen you do it by meditating on God's word, by setting your mind on the very words of God. And what's the main thing God's word tells us?

It's that God has a Son and that his Son is our savior, his Son is our refuge.

Most scholars think that Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are a unit. That they're meant to be read together.

Psalm 1 starts with the word "blessed" and Psalm 2 ends with the word "blessed". The word "blessed" bookends them like a unit.

And in Psalm 2 we meet God's Son and at the very end of Psalm 2 we read this...

text: Psalm 2.12 - Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Who take refuge in God's Son...What does it mean to take refuge in him. It means to make him your advocate in the courtroom. Because you've walked in step with the wicked, you can't stand in the courtroom. But he can. When Jesus Christ—God's Son—lived here on earth, he never took even one step with the wicked. He spend his entire life delighting in the Law of the Lord, his entire life pursuing not his own happiness, but righteousness. Which means he is the only one who can stand in the courtroom.

And the message of the Bible, the message that the Psalmist is urging us to meditate on, delight in, tells us that God's Son not only is our advocate, but he's our substitute. The guilty verdict that belongs to you and me was given to him. He took all our charges. When he went to the cross he died the death that we should have died.

But he didn't stay dead, he couldn't stay dead, he was raised from the dead and now he is not only our substitute, but he's our advocate in the courtroom. He stands next to us and says to the righteous judge, yes, this person is guilty, but I already paid the penalty.

And because of that, now we can stand with the righteous. We are declared righteous in Jesus Christ.

That is the Christian message. That is the core message of the Bible.

Remember our fork in the road: seek happiness or seek righteousness? If you seek righteousness more than happiness, you'll get both. If you seek happiness more than righteousness, you'll get neither.

Don't you see, if you meditate on Jesus Christ and the righteousness he gives to us, you'll be blessed? Seek righteousness and you'll get blessing thrown in.

Psalm 1 is just the overture, it's familiarizing you with the sights and sounds of the entire Bible. But if you keep going, keep reading, keep meditating, day and night. When you rise and when you lay down at night. When you walk along the road, when you're seated around the dinner table. If you meditate on the central message of the Bible it fills you with delight.

You become like the tree in verse 3, bearing fruit, enduring through drought as you draw strength from the stream of God's Word—the message about Jesus Christ.

Now, this will be the last time I'll address you as a pastor and an elder of this church. And I very intentionally chose this passage, because here's what I want for each and every one of you. Be like this tree...meditate day and night, teach it to your children...pass it on to every student who comes to this city...share this with every person who doesn't know Jesus. Because I believe if you do that, you'll be blessed, you'll flourish. You'll flourish as individuals, and you'll flourish as a church.