“The Way of the Righteous,” Psalm 1 (Ninth Sunday After Pentecost, August 2, 2020)

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers; **2** but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. **3**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.

**4**The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. **5**Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; **6**for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

PRAY

We begin this morning an eight-week series on the book of Psalms. If you know anything about the length of the book of Psalms, then you know that we won’t cover the entire book in eight weeks. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 individual psalms, which form 150 chapters in our translations, more chapters than any other book in the Bible. By word count, it’s the third longest book of the Bible, behind Jeremiah and Genesis.

Therefore, we can’t cover the entire book in eight weeks, or even eight months. Instead, these next eight weeks we’ll do is sample some of the psalms out of the first twenty at the beginning of the book. Perhaps in a year or two, we’ll come back and look at some more psalms out of the next section of the book, and slowly work our way through it like that.

The book of Psalms has often been called the prayer book of the Bible, because so many of the psalms are prayers of David or some other person from ancient Israel. If you want to learn how to pray, don’t go buy a book on prayer. Don’t first ask to see someone’s prayer list. Instead, read the psalms. See how honest the psalm writers are with God about their frustrations and sadness. After all, almost half of the psalms are psalms of lament and grief. See how angry the psalmists are with their enemies, pleading with God not to let evildoers get away with what they’ve done. See how the psalmists praise the glory of God.

The book of psalms has also been called the Bible’s hymnbook. In fact, our word “psalm” comes from a Greek word which means “song.” Many of the Psalms are set to music. The precise melodies and harmonies used by the Israelites when they sang the psalms have been lost to us, but as we go through the book we’ll see some of the musical terms used in the introductions to many of the psalms.

Singing the psalms was common practice in churches until relatively recently. If you were able to travel back in time and attend a Baptist, or Methodist, or Presbyterian church service in Mississippi before the Civil War, most likely only psalms would be sung during the service. They had hymns, they knew and loved the hymns of John Newton and William Cowper and Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, but they only sang them in small groups in homes, never during the church service. In fact, some churches still sing only psalms on Sundays.

But our psalm for today, Psalm 1, is different. It isn’t a prayer, nor is it a song, nor is it a lament. Rather, it’s a psalm of wisdom. It would fit very well in the books of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. Many scholars posit that it was written after all the other psalms were gathered into a book, to serve as an introduction, to encourage readers to walk with God.

Let’s look at Psalm 1 this morning and I want to show you three things about it: Psalm 1 contains *a promise*, *a condition*, and *a warning.*

First, a promise. There is a promise in Psalm 1 that no one should dare overlook or think too lightly about. Verse 1 says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.” You realize what the psalmist is saying? ***He’s saying happiness is possible.***

“Happy” is the best way to translate the Hebrew word rendered as “blessed” in our version. You could do the same thing with the Beatitudes, in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “blessed are the peacemakers.” You could translate that as “happy are the poor in spirit” and “happy are the peacemakers.”

But for a long time, as a pastor, I didn’t want to use the word “happy” because I associated “happiness” with being superficial, frivolous, or lighthearted all the time. And then that Pharrell Williams song came out a few years ago, “Happy,” which seemed to confirm all my worst suspicions about the word. In it he says happiness is clapping and dancing and feeling like a room without a roof. I’m not sure what a roofless room has to do with happiness, but OK.

There’s nothing wrong with any of that. It’s OK to be in a roofless room, I guess, unless it’s raining. But in Psalm 1, happiness isn’t superficial. To be happy means to be satisfied. It is to be full. It is to be content, rested, at peace, *regardless of what going on in the world around you*.

We all want happiness, so to get it what do we do? We think the ***right set of circumstances*** will bring us happiness. Therefore, we seek success by doing well at school or at killing it at work. We seek it in money, or we try and find it in a new sexual partner.

But there is no guarantee that getting any or all of those things will bring happiness. We all know people, either personally or through the media, that are very successful, or wealthy, or attractive, who are also very miserable. They hate their lives.

Psalm 1 does not promise us wealth, or success in our career, or fame, or any other worldly blessing, but that’s ok ***because happiness is not inextricably linked to any of those things.*** Now think with me: if you find yourself truly happy, satisfied, content, then does it matter how much money you have? If you’re truly happy, does it matter how impressive your job is? Don’t you know people that have jobs that don’t seem all that important who, nevertheless, seem very satisfied? Does it matter if you’re in a relationship or not? Happiness is what you are made for, and Psalm 1 offers it regardless of the circumstances in your life.

Verses 3-4 explain how it works. It says the man who is blessed, who is happy, “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. **4**The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.”

Think about that imagery. Chaff is the dry, scaly protective casing of the seeds of grain. It is refuse once you get the seed out of it. It’s lighter than the seed, so at threshing time the farmer tosses the wheat up into the wind, the seed falls right back to the ground, but the wind carries the chaff away.

Worldly sources of pleasure are like that. When exposed to the wind, the smallest change in circumstances, they can all blow away. It’s so easy to lose.

But the happy man is like a tree that bears its fruit every season because its roots have burrowed down deep into the soil so as to be firmly planted. Down on the coast in Biloxi on the property where the Church of the Redeemer once sat is a southern live oak tree. It’s distinctive in that it has one limb with a hollow spot right in the middle of it. You can see through the little ring to the other side of the limb.

The Church of the Redeemer itself was destroyed first by Hurricane Camille in 1969. They rebuilt it, only for it to be felled again by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But the “ring in the oak” tree still stands. Two of the most powerful hurricanes the earth has ever known couldn’t take it down. It still bears its fruit each season.

Psalm 1 happiness like that: ***impervious to circumstances***. It cannot be shaken; it cannot be taken from you. No matter the storm life throws at you, you remain satisfied and content.

I hope none of you think, like I once did, that it’s somehow less that Christian, or a sign of immaturity, to want happiness. I hope you see that Psalm 1 happiness is what you need and what you were made for.

Psalm 1 tells us that this happiness is not just possible ***but promised.*** Verse 1 does not say, “A man might be blessed …”. No, it says, “Blessed is the man.” Do you know how to get it?

Second, the condition. Not everyone will receive the promise, but only those who meet a particular condition in their lives. Verse 2a: “[B]ut his delight is in the law of the Lord...”

If you’re ever going to be happy, you must ***delight in the law of the Lord***. When the psalmist uses the word “law” in verse 2 he doesn’t just mean the direct commands God gives in the Scripture. He doesn’t refer only to the Ten Commandments, but to all the Scripture. In light of Jesus, that means everything in both the Old and New Testaments.

But what does the psalmist mean by delighting in the law? I’ve been around some people, usually it’s young men who want to go to seminary, who love to talk about the Bible, who love to debate the minutiae of doctrine, but they always seem to wind up telling everyone around them about how wrong they are in their theological views.

Have you ever known any guys like that? That’s not delighting in the law of the Lord. That’s delighting in how much you think you know about the law of the Lord.

You might think, “J.D., I can respect the law of God. I can honor it. I can admire how millions of people believe it to be the very word of God. But I don’t see how I can delight in it.”

Think about it like this: think about all the ways you’ve tried to find happiness on your own. You’ve tried to get that boy to like you. You’ve tried to find it through good grades in school. You’ve tried to find it in your children or in your career. And while it’s possible you’ve found short bursts of pleasure and enjoyment in those things, you know you haven’t found satisfaction. You’re not full. You’re not at rest and at peace.

Plus, when your circumstances determine your happiness ***then your happiness is all up to you.*** Rachel Hollis is an author, she calls herself a Christian, and her books are published by a Christian publishing house and marketed to women.

Her most successful book thus far, *Girl, Wash Your Face,* is full of quotes like this: “You are meant to be the hero of your own story.” “You, and only you, are ultimately responsible for who you become and how happy you are.” “You should be the very first of your priorities.”

One reviewer summed up Hollis’ message very aptly. She said, “In all these scenarios, [Hollis’] answer [for how to find happiness in life] is always something like picking yourself up by your bootstraps and striving and trying and running a marathon and getting therapy and reciting mantras and reading a good blog post … and seeing a guru and drinking wine and not drinking wine and relaxing and taking a vacation and keeping the promises you make to yourself.  *Anything* but surrendering your life to Jesus and placing your trust in him alone. Your happiness … —it’s all up to you, ladies. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think that’s good news. [God] offers us true joy and peace, but only after we realize that we’re not the center of our own lives and that we’re no longer in charge.”

Eventually, when you try to be in charge of your happiness, you will wear yourself out and make yourself and the people around you miserable.

But when you finally leave that life behind and instead look to God to make you happy, when you see that the law of God is, as another psalmist put it, “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105), you’ll delight in it. It will be a source of great comfort and relief.

C.S. Lewis in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* puts it this way. He says the law of God is true, it’s sound, it’s something that will not give way or collapse. It’s a firm place where you can stand. Therefore, when the psalmist calls God’s law a delight, it “is a delight in having touched firmness; like the [hiker’s] delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.” When you find every other way of living is like quicksand waiting to suck you down, and when you find nothing else can bring you satisfaction and contentment and joy like the law of God, you will delight in it.

What are we do to do with the law once we begin to delight in it? *Second, we meditate on it.* The entirety of verse 2 reads like this: “[B]ut his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law ***he meditates day and night.***”

We hear the word “meditate” and we think of something totally different from what the psalmist meant because we have been so influenced in our culture by passive, Eastern meditation. In Eastern meditation the whole point is to empty your mind by sitting in a certain position and reciting your mantra. The point of that kind of meditation is to think about nothing.

But the Hebrew word “meditate” is active. It means to think, to reflect, to study, to talk about something. The man who delights in God’s law pores over it, can’t get enough of it. He gets around groups of people to talk about it and flesh it out and apply it to his life.

Now how, precisely, are we to meditate on it? A lot of Christians have been taught it only means to take a band-aid approach to meditation. They begin with their feelings, where they hurt or are troubled, go find a verse that addresses it, and slap that verse on their problems. For example, if you’re worried you go to a verse on like Philippians 4:6: “6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God,” and you slap it on yourself and think about it. Or, if you’re feeling kind of lost and hopeless, go to Jeremiah 29:11 and slap it on: “11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,” and you think about it.

There’s nothing wrong with doing that. It’s just that’s not at all what the psalmist had in mind. First of all, it is extremely limiting when you do that. With that approach you will inevitably ignore huge chunks of the Bible because reading those parts are just kind of boring to you. You will likely never read most of the Old Testament, much of Acts, Galatians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, and Revelation, for example. Those parts of the law won’t meet your feelings directly. Second, it’s not effective to just jump in and out of the Bible like that.

But more importantly, when you approach Scripture that way your feelings lead the way, instead of allowing God’s law to lead the way. It treats the Bible as if it’s primarily written to give you therapy instead of disclosing the glory of God to the world.

Here’s how one commentator explained the problem: “Once, people read the [Bible] and sought to set their own story in its context. Since the eighteenth century we are more inclined to set Scripture’s story in the context of ours. It is our story [and needs and fears and desires and worries] that provides the criteria for deciding whether the scriptural story is true or relevant. We measure Scripture’s story by ours. The attitude [Psalm 1] commends involves delighting in God’s teaching – especially (we might add) when its story seems irrelevant or it takes a different stance from us. That is the moment when [meditating on] Scripture becomes interesting, significant, and important. We delight in it. The way that delight expresses itself is by talking about it day and night – in other words, ceaselessly.” Goldingay, *Psalms*, 83-84.

Meditation does not mean starting with how you feel, finding individual verses in the Bible, and then thinking on them to make you feel better. ***The Bible is not a prescription you get filled at CVS and then take, but a path you walk.*** Meditation means primarily reading the Bible as it’s been given to you and immersing yourself in it.

For example, say you’ve determined to submit yourself to the law, and you read through the book of Exodus. You say, “I’m going to let the Bible lead me, not the other way around.”

If you do that as you read Exodus you’ll say, “I am a faith descendant of these Israelites. Their story is my story. Their history is my history.” You’ll read through Exodus to chapter 14 (whereas with the band-aid approach you might never read that far). In chapter 14 you’ll read where children of Israel have left Egypt but are caught between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea. They are terrified and sure they are going to die. But Moses says, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. **14**The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” Exodus 14:13-14. And then God led them through the Red Sea on dry ground to safety, but when Pharaoh’s army tried to follow they were destroyed.

Maybe on that day you read Exodus 14 you are really worried, or afraid. Maybe that particular day you feel great. It doesn’t matter, because as you read it you’ll realize something. You’ll realize, “My responsibility as a faith descendant of Israel, as a child of the living God, is not to provide for myself or protect myself. My job certainly isn’t to find my own happiness. Instead, what I must do is fear not, stand firm, and believe that the Lord fights the battles for me. All I have to do in my life is be still, know that he is God, trust him, and he will do the rest.”

The more you meditate on Scripture, the more you study it and talk about it (rather than what you see on social media or movies or television), the more you’ll delight in the law, trust God, and, in turn, find yourself happy. Content and satisfied, because you know God is in control.

Third, a warning. Verse 1: “Blessed is the man who **walks** not in the counsel of the wicked, nor **stands** in the way of sinners, nor **sits** in the seat of scoffers …”. Those three verbs, walk, stand, and sit, show the three degrees of departure from God and conformity to the world.

First, you’re walking with the world, accepting its advice on happiness, beginning to think on it. Then, you’re standing with the world, acting on the advice, letting it effect your behavior. Finally, you’re sitting with the world. In Hebrew thought, when you sit with a group of people you belong to a group of people. If you’re sitting with the elders at the city gate, you’re belong to the most honorable group around. But if you’re sitting with scoffers, with fools, then you’re a fool, and your heart is hardened against the message of the Bible.

Psalm 1 contains a warning: if you are bound and determined to reject the wisdom of God found in the Bible and walk, stand, and sit with the scoffers of the world, the scoffers who say this God-talk is foolishness, that of course the only way to happiness is found in circumstances, God will let you. He won’t stop you. He’ll let you try and find happiness in the world, and sooner or later you’ll find it’s all a fraud. You thought you were walking to an oasis in the desert, where you could find something to satisfy your thirst, but in the end it turns out to be a mirage.

And you’ll find yourself judged. That’s verses 5-6: “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; **6**for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

The fact of the matter is that we’ve all, to some degree, walked in the counsel of the wicked, stood in the way of sinners, and sat in the seat of scoffers. We all deserve to be judged.

But God loved us so much that he refused to abandon us in our sin and foolishness. He sent his son Jesus Christ to rescue us. Jesus, who never once took counsel of the wicked. He never scoffed at God. Rather, he obeyed God perfectly and he delighted in God’s law day and night.

Jesus is the one who said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Matthew 5:18.

Jesus kept the law perfectly, and then at the end of his life he was judged. He perished. He died in our place on the cross for our sin, for our wickedness, for our scoffing, so that we could live and be happy by delighting in the law, which includes the good news of what Jesus has done for us.

Friends, happiness is possible. Don’t look to circumstances to get it. Instead, look to the Jesus Christ revealed in the law and delight in what God has done for you day and night. Happiness is possible, it’s in his hands. Go to him and let him give it to you. AMEN