

## **“Come On, Get Happy”**

August 5, 2018

*Psalms for the Soul* series

*Like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved.*

That short chorus was my first experience of Psalm 1 – in my home church in Mason. That was where I learned the faith – where my relationship with God got off the ground. Psalm 1 was probably some of the first Scripture I learned - or at least the first one I remember.

But most of us don't know Psalm 1. We know a few others that we like – psalms that we turn to for comfort and help like Psalm 23 (The Lord is my Shepherd) or Psalm 121 (I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?). But Psalm 1 is a very good place to start. And if you're not sure how to find Psalms, split your Bible down the middle, and you'll be close. Many of us like the Psalms; they are timeless. Even when I posted on Facebook about this series, someone responded with a comment, “I love the Psalms!”

As I've done my own digging in the Psalms, I've been challenged. They are beautiful words and honest words. This is how our ancient faith ancestors prayed and sang. Why the Psalms are so special to us? How can the Psalms take us into a deeper relationship with God?

First – a little history. The Psalms are for worship. They were written to be sung in worship. Singing “I Shall Not Be Moved” certainly helps us understand that. And we can picture our ancestors in the faith singing and dancing for God, can't we? But the Psalms are also filled with deep thinking, raw human emotion, and good advice about how we can live faithfully.

And Psalm 1 starts by offering good advice and a promise. It tells us how we can be “happy” – sometimes that's translated “blessed” or perhaps “at peace with God.” Psalm 1 is called a Torah psalm. Torah is the Hebrew word for “instruction.” So this psalm seeks to teach us, and the teaching calls us to get happy - not according to the standards around us, but according to God. This first psalm sets the tone for the rest of the 150.

But we have to acknowledge the struggle and tell the truth: sometimes it seems that the wicked win. Sometimes those who are trying to be faithful experience deep despair. Have you ever felt like that?

This psalm isn't a promise of having it all, and to say that prosperity is a sign of God's love is a false teaching. The promise here is that God is faithful and caring. The Law isn't just a set of rules that lead to health and wealth; it's about developing a

relationship with God who brings freedom for those who are oppressed and seeks justice for the poor. It's about living our faith now and seeking to follow God.

We heard a verse from *The Message* version of Psalm 1 earlier, but I invite us to hear the psalm in its entirety: **SHOW SLIDE**

<sup>1</sup> *How well God must like you—you don't hang out at Sin Saloon, you don't slink along Dead-End Road, you don't go to Smart-Mouth College.*

<sup>2-3</sup> *Instead you thrill to God's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night.*

*You're a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, Never dropping a leaf, always in blossom.*

<sup>4-5</sup> *You're not at all like the wicked, who are mere windblown dust— Without defense in court, unfit company for innocent people.*

<sup>6</sup> *God charts the road you take. The road they take is Skid Row.*

It begins with this sharp contrast between people who are righteous – those who follow the ways of God – and the wicked - those who go another path. Susan Johnson says it's "about the company we keep" and a call to be aware of how we're affected by others. There's a call to be intentional here.

To really get this psalm, we have to re-think how we define some words. First, "happiness." It's not just when we feel good or when things are going well for us. The writer here tells us that "happiness" comes when we're connected to God – when we stay connected to God's Word, when we are open to God's instruction, when we take time to hear what God is saying to us, not a chore or an obligation – but a choice and commitment!

"Happy" means that we're connected to the Word of God – for the people who recited this that was the Torah – the Law. They were dependent on the Law to know how to love and serve God, but not simply rules, but a life of relationship with God. And it's no different today!

How many of us picked up and read our Bible within the last week? Can we say that we meditate on it day and night like this psalm says? Barna Research tells us that more than 85% of U.S. households own a Bible; it's somewhere at home. We know that a lot of people are fond of the Bible, but does that mean actually opening it and reading it?

That's a struggle and a challenge for us. We cannot find true happiness and connection with God if we don't read and engage with God's Word. One study reported recently that fewer than 20% of Christians engage with the Bible every day or a few times a week.

Maybe you've seen one of the late-night talk show hosts ask the audience some questions about the Bible. Usually they didn't do so well. "Name one of the Ten Commandments." "God helps those who help themselves?" which isn't correct. "Name one of the disciples." No one tries to guess. However, when asked to name the Beatles, the answer comes immediately – John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

Diving into Scripture has to be a discipline if we seek to follow God. We have to figure out what God is saying to us even now – for ourselves, as the church, as Christians living in the world. So we stay connected to God and to God's teaching. Even so, staying on the right path is sometimes very clear; we know what to do. But many times, it's not so simple. We have to read and be prayerful.

And then there's that image of the tree planted by the water. Has anyone ever visited the Middle East? If you have, you know that in the area of Palestine, very little vegetation grows in an arid desert, but there is lush vegetation near flowing streams. And for people who lived in this desert region, the image of fruit-bearing trees beside life-giving streams of water is powerful! The psalm says that those who follow God's Word bear fruit and don't wither away. They prosper. A better translation is that they *thrive*.

When we read this psalm, we're encouraged to trust God – to sink our spiritual roots in the law of God because growth and fruitfulness of our faith is the result. That's difficult to do in the midst of troubles in our lives and in our world. We're encouraged to entrust our lives to God – to be open to being molded and taught by God's Word. That means being grounded in Scripture, pulling from tradition, and always looking for where God is present today. That means witnessing to God's goodness and grace.

And the image of the tree is beautiful, but the psalmist goes further. We get to the people we really want to talk about, right? The "wicked!" How many of us would call ourselves "wicked?" Anyone want to volunteer?

That's really the challenge of this psalm. If a tree planted by the water is staying connected to God, then wickedness is choosing to be self-centered rather than God-centered. Wickedness is living as if we can do it all on our own – living as though we don't need any help. We focus on our own urges and desires without a thought for anyone else. The happy ones are teachable, but the wicked resist God's instruction and have nothing to stand on. They can be easily moved without a firm foundation.

So then we have another image – the chaff. Harvesting grain meant cutting it - stalks and all. It was brought to a threshing floor, where heavy sledges or manual thrashing of the grain against the floor separated the seed heads from the stalks. When the breeze came in the evening, a winnowing fork was used to toss the grain into the air. The wind would blow away the lighter outer husks of the grain's seed heads, leaving

the grain, which could then be used for bread and other things. So that image is powerful: the wicked are like useless, lightweight chaff, blown away by the wind.

Sounds awful, doesn't it? But consider that our culture prizes autonomy – freedom and independence, the ability to do what we want when we want. To ask for help, to admit that we need help, is sometimes seen as a sign of weakness. If we take this psalm to heart, we'll feel the challenge and discomfort. If we choose to resist God's instruction, to ignore the ways that God is speaking, to think that we can do it all on our own, then we're not the happy ones, but leaning to the other side.

This psalm makes a clear, stark contrast between righteous and wicked. I'll admit - that's a bit uncomfortable - no shade of gray here. And yet the simple message is the challenge – that we could be the righteous ones the psalm is talking about. We want to have “right aim” before God – like an archer aiming at a target. We want to do the right thing and be faithful. We want to move closer to God, and we need God's help to love God and love neighbor, the essence of Law.

If we're honest, we're a mixture of both righteous and wicked because this is about our relationship with God. Sometimes we meditate on God's Word day and night, and sometimes we say, “I can do it by myself.” Sometimes we take the time to read and pray, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we're firmly grounded in God.

But it's the goal – to be connected to God so closely that God is at the center of our lives. Consider that image – to be so stable in God that we shall not be moved, that we could be fruitful in our daily living, that we could be thriving! What a thought!

But it's more than just a thought or dream. It's a possibility because God is faithful and God desires relationship with us! God's Word is a source of hope, healing, and sustenance for us! We have to open ourselves to it so that it can become part of us! We have to be intentional and active.

Psalms 1 reminds us that our faith is a gift of God, but it's also about our response. We choose to believe. We choose to be connected to God through worship, fellowship, praying, giving, sharing, caring, serving. We choose how we spend our time. To be righteous, to be happy, isn't about being perfect, but it's about relying on God's faithful love.

We find that perfect love – that faithful love embodied in Jesus Christ, and we come to the table he sets today...

**PRAYERS OF CONFESSION & WORDS OF ASSURANCE**