

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Psalm 1

Intro: On this first Sunday of this new year, 2004, I am going to speak on a passage of Scripture that I have used more than any other chapter in the whole Bible: Psalm 1. And yet I have never brought the same message even two times. I may have mentioned some of the same details because year after year neither this Psalm nor any other part of the Word of God, has changed. And so some repetition is unavoidable. But it seems to me that every year when we hear “Happy New Year” spoken to us, and we have said these words many times to others, and it appears on cards which we send and receive, that it is valuable for us to go back to Psalm 1 to clarify our thinking as to what makes a new year a happy year. We are all interested in being happy. No one likes to be unhappy. But we all know that there are many things in this world of ours which can make us very sad, or frustrated, or even angry. And so it is a very legitimate question for us to ask, Is it possible to live in a world like ours, and be happy, continuously happy? And the answer God has given us in His Word, is, yes, it is! In fact, as I have pointed out to you before, the Hebrew of verse 1 in Psalm 1 should be translated, “O, the blessednesses (plural) of the man who ...” But it is not the kind of happiness that the world calls happiness. The happiness that the Bible speaks of can really only be experienced by those who are truly Christian, those who are trusting the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. And yet those of us who know the Lord often demonstrate by the way we live that we have not yet learned the meaning of true happiness.

What do people usually mean when they say, “Happy New Year?” Probably most of the time they mean that they hope you will have a trouble-free year as far as physical health is concerned, as far as financial security is concerned. They hope you will be free from accidents. And, on the positive side, they hope you will be able to do what you want to do, to have what you want to have, and to go where you would like to go. I am sure that the list could be expanded indefinitely. But when the list has been completed, we all have to admit that life is not like that. We all have our trials. It is probably true that no one's life is 100% what he or she wishes it were. That is what ought to make us very interested in Psalm 1 as well as many other passages of Scripture which speak of happiness, of joy and rejoicing.

If I were to select a NT book which gives us the truth about happiness,

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true happiness, my selection would probably be the book of Philipians. As you know, it was not written at a particularly happy time in Paul's life, at least from a human point-of-view. He was in prison. His future was very uncertain. And he was there for doing what he loved to do more than anything else – for preaching the Gospel. And yet the book is full of his own joy as well as exhortations for his readers to join him in his joy. Paul had learned to be content whatever his circumstances were. He even took his imprisonment as an opportunity that under any other conditions he would not have had. As conditions worsen in the world, you would think that the Bible would be the book that people would be eager to read, and eager to hear it explained. But that is not the case. By nature we are inclined to think we know what will make us happy. But our pursuit of happiness is like what people used to say during the great depression of the late twenties and early thirties: that prosperity is “just around the corner.” The trouble was nobody could find the right corner.

Now let us look at Psalm 1 to see what we can learn about happiness because that is the subject. And I want you to notice that the Psalmist, probably King David, spoke of two kinds of people. It sounds like he could be speaking of just anybody until you get down to verse 4 when he suddenly says that what he was saying in the first three verses did not apply to people he called “ungodly.” He had mentioned the “ungodly” in verse 1, and classed them also as “sinners” and “scornful.” But in verse 4 he indicated that if you go to the “ungodly” for advice as to how you should live your daily life, you will get the wrong kind of counsel.” And reading on to the end of the Psalm we see that he contrasted the “ungodly” with people he called, “righteous.” Furthermore, he called the “ungodly,” “sinners” in verse 5.

We need to keep these distinctions clearly in mind. Another word that he might have used for the “righteous” since he called the opposite group “ungodly,” would have been the word “godly.”

How can we explain the difference in these terms? The term “ungodly” is a Hebrew word which is usually translated *wicked* in the KJV. And excellent definition or description of it is given in Isa. 57:20-21:

20 But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest,
whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

21 There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.

Basically a wicked person is a person who is guilty before God. He lives a life that is displeasing to God, and this is why he is also called a sinner.

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So a person who lives the way he wants to live instead of living the way God wants him to live, is not a person who is going to experience true happiness. He needs to be changed, and God is the only One Who can change him. The change that is needed is salvation, or the new birth, the work that is done in the hearts of those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved.

“The righteous,” on the other hand, are those who are right with God, people have been saved from the penalty of their sins and from the power of sin. They are people who have trusted Christ as their Savior, who know God, and want to live to please God.

So you can see why some people enjoy true happiness, and others do not. It all comes down to a person’s relationship with God and with God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The person who knows God, and wants to please God, is likened in this Psalm to a tree. The person who does not know God, and who does not want to please God, is likened to “chaff which the wind driveth away.”

So true happiness can only be experienced by people who know God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who are living to please Him instead of always seeking their own pleasure. This does not mean that a Christian’s life is trouble-free. Nobody’s life is like that. But it does mean that in spite of all of the difficulties everybody goes through, there can be a peace and a joy in the heart of a child of God that people in the world know nothing about, but which can keep us rejoicing in the Lord while we are in the midst of our trials.

So the person who wants to experience a truly happy life must know God.

But I said to begin with that there are people who may truly know God as their heavenly Father and Jesus Christ as their Savior, who still do not experience the blessings that such a relationship with God and Christ ought to bring to them. What is wrong?

We know that verse 1 is talking about one who knows the Lord because he goes on to speak in verse 2 about what that person will do, and no person without Christ would even be remotely interested in doing what verse 2 says that he should be doing.

You know, there are many Christians who really know the Lord, but

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instead of living their lives by the Scriptures, they keep one foot in the world. In some ways they may try to please the Lord. They go to church. They read the Bible at least some of the time. They give to the Lord's work, and may be active in some kind of church ministry, but when it comes to the way they make decisions in the lives, and where they seek advice in making decisions, they follow the wisdom of men, the ways of the world, instead of seeking to do the will of God.

The three statements that the psalmist made in this first verse show how a wrong start can lead to a continuing declension. Derek Kidner points this out very clear in his comments on this Psalm. Looking at the words *counsel*, *way*, and *seat*, he said that this draws "attention to the realms of thinking, behaving, and belonging." If we look to worldly men for our counsel, we will begin to think like them. And then we begin to behave like them. And then we begin to feel so comfortable that we feel that we belong with them. And then Kidner mentioned that these are three stages in a person's departure from the Lord. We accept the world's advice, then we become a party to its ways, and then adopt the world's attitude, which is scorn.

This must be why John MacArthur continually says that the battle we face in the world, is the battle for the mind. And this is why millions upon millions of people in the world are never truly happy. It is because their thinking is all wrong. That is why Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Devil drew her thinking away from the revealed will of God, and she began to think that there were more good things about that fruit than there were bad things. And so she ate it, and got Adam to do the same, and the world has been suffering from their sin right down to the present hour.

As we pray for our young people who are attending colleges and universities, but the problem permeates our whole educational system. Worldly teachers can do a lot of damage by getting our children and young people to start thinking the wrong way. All of us are subject to these dangers.

Well, how can we protect ourselves? Look at verses 2 and 3. (Read.)

True and lasting happiness comes to the person who "delights" in the law of the Lord. What you delight in is what you love, that which is most valuable to you, that which brings you great pleasure. You can test where you are spiritually by the place that the Word of God has in your life. It is

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the Word of God which really determines whether 2004 is going to be a blessed year, a happy year, for you and me. It is good to come to church to hear it, but that is not enough. It is good also to read it. That is absolutely essential, but we still need more than that. What the psalmist wrote was that what shows that we really delight in the Word is how much we meditate in it. What does “meditate” mean? It means that we are thinking about what we hear when we come to church. It means that we are thinking about what we read. We don’t just rush through our reading, but we have our minds engaged as we read it. We are always thinking about the Word. What do you do when you wake up at night and have a hard time getting back to sleep again? Does your mind turn to the Word of God? Have you memorized some verses so you can think about them in those waking moments. And one thing you will learn quickly when you think about the Word, is that you will be praying that the Lord will help you to understand what you are reading, and how to apply it to your daily living.

The psalmist was speaking of all of the Word of God when he spoke of the Law, and basic to the idea in the word “law” is the idea of teaching which in turn leads to obedience. The people who reject the ten commandments, or any other part of Scripture, and saying by what they do that they don’t want to be reminded about God or His will. This course of action always leads to tragedy personally and nationally.

What happens to the child of God who consistently meditates on the Word “day and night”? He becomes like a tree planted by the rivers of water, a fruit bearing tree, whose leaves do not wither, and where there is continuing blessing. Countless blessings will come our way when we really treat the Word of God the way the Lord wants us to treat it – reading it, praying over it, seeking greater understanding, praying that God will give us the desire and the ability to live for His glory,

But, as I have mentioned, the access to all of these blessings is closed to all who do not love the Word of God. “The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.” What a difference there is between a tree and chaff. What is “chaff”? It is the husk of wheat or other grain which is removed what the grain is threshed. But chaff has become a synonym for anything that is worthless. So those who live for themselves, but not for God, are worth nothing. They may be celebrities in the eyes of the world, but their value is nothing in the light of the fact that we all face the judgment of God.

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Finally in the last verse we have the two ways again, and there are only two. If you are not in “the way of the righteous,” you are “in the way of the ungodly.”

The Psalm concludes with a very interesting and a very important statement: “The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous.” The “way of the righteous” is the only way that is pleasing to the Lord. It is the way we should always want to be in, the way of obedience to the Word of God. But what does it mean that “the Lord knoweth”? Of course it means that the Lord is aware of everything that is going on in our lives. But it also means that He has ordered our steps, that He cares for us, and He identifies with us. What comfort there is in all of this! The Lord knows where we are. Ever since we moved we have had that little sticker on our mail that we need to notify our correspondents so that they will know where we are. But we never have to let the Lord know where we are! He knows all about us moment by moment. He knows our trials and our struggles. Job said,

10 But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

11 My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined.

12 Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food (Job 23:10-12).

When the Lord was teaching about prayer and how the heathen think that that the more they say, the better the gods will hear them. But He told His disciples not to be like that because, as He said, “Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him” (Matt. 6:8).

Concl: Now I imagine that most of you can quote this Psalm from memory.

But let me press the truth of it upon your hearts, if the Lord will enable me to do so. You know the Psalm, and you can repeat it, but are you living it. I ask myself the same question. I confess that I have much to learn about what the Psalmist wrote in these six verses. But if we want 2004 to be a truly happy one for us, the key is in the place that the Word has in our living. May the Lord give us greater blessing each time we hear the Word taught. And may He bless our reading of the Word more than ever before. But let us spend time morning, noon, and night, meditating on the Word, and praying for greater understanding, that we might glorify the Lord for His Word, and reap the blessings that are promised to those who not only read the Word, but who stop in our reading to think about what we are reading for God’s glory and our good.