

The Pursuit of Happiness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a week ago, America, Americans celebrated one of their most important holidays of the year, which is July the 4th, Independence Day. And that's a public holiday in the States, and it celebrates when the USA officially became their own country, when they broke away from British rule in the year 1776.

And it was then, when they became their own nation, that they could decide for the first time what their nation was going to be about, what their values would be, what American people would live for.

I mean, imagine that. Imagine you got to start your own nation, your own country, and you got to decide what would be the values of the people living in that country. Well, that's what the Americans and the forefathers of America did then in 1776.

And the Americans decided that America was going to be about three things, which is in their Declaration of Independence. And the three things they decided America was going to be about was life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

That's what, officially, Americans are to live for. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And the thing about those phrases in the U.S. Declaration of Independence is that I think they hit the nail right on the head in defining what everyone lives for today.

[1 : 2 6] What drives people to do what they do, especially the last one. You see that last phrase, the pursuit of happiness. Everybody wants to be happy, really.

And if you boiled it down, that's really what people are living for all over the world. That's why they go to work, to get money. It's why they go on holiday. It's why people get married, to be happy.

Our world is essentially billions of people rushing around to find happiness. And the sad thing is that nobody seems to have found it yet.

Yes, there are certain times in life, of course, when we experience happiness. But even then, we're never quite as happy as we want to be, are we? And that's why it's called the pursuit of happiness.

I mean, you only pursue something that you haven't caught yet. And no one's quite nailed down how to be truly happy, have they? Happiness is very elusive.

[2 : 2 3] It's like the end of a rainbow. The closer you get to it, the further away it goes. I wonder if that's your experience with pursuing happiness in your life.

Well, that is why Psalm 1 is just such a captivating psalm. Because it begins... In fact, the whole book of psalms in the Bible begins with the word happy in the original Hebrew.

It's often translated blessed, but the original word is simply the Hebrew word for happy. And this psalm claims to tell you how you can find true happiness.

Which is huge if you want to be happy. In fact, let's do a test. Who here wants to be happy? Put up your hand. I think that's everyone.

Yeah? Everyone wants to be happy. So now, if you put up your hand this morning, you need to hear what this psalm says. You need to concentrate on it because it claims to tell you how you can find the one thing that everyone in the world is running after.

[3 : 31] While everybody is trying to find a way to be happy, this psalm says, well, here's how. And so let's look at this psalm together and see what it teaches us. See what God has to teach us this morning.

And the first thing I want to say about this psalm is that this is certainly not what we expect from the Bible, is it? It's almost like what we expect from a self-help manual, how to have a happy life.

I mean, we expect the Bible to tell us about noble things like how to be more holy, how to be pure, how to be sinless, how to obey God. Not something seemingly selfish and worldly like just how to be happy.

But the truth is, happiness is not just a worldly thing. On the contrary, happiness, our happiness, is in fact at the very heart of God's plans for His people right from the beginning of time.

The fact that the book of Psalms, which is God's word, begins with a psalm about how to be happy, teaches us something about God Himself, doesn't it? It teaches us that God wants you to be happy.

[4 : 36] God wants you to be happy. That's the first thing that really stands out about the psalm, is God's word, starting with the word happy. God wants you to be happy. Yes, He wants you to be holy and pure and righteous and all that.

But ultimately, that is a means to an end. God's end goal for you, believe it or not, is to be happy. God didn't create you for the purpose of experiencing pain and sorrow and sadness.

He created you for pleasure and joy and to experience those things. I mean, God invented your taste buds. Now, why would He invent taste buds? Have you ever thought about that?

You don't actually need taste buds to get nutrition in your body. You could eat food without taste buds and it would still nourish your body and you'd be able to live.

Why did God invent taste buds? Because God doesn't only want you to eat food for nourishment and to stay alive. He wants you to enjoy it. He wants you to experience pleasure from what He's given.

[5 : 39] God made you to experience happiness. He made you to be happy. God ultimately wants you to be happy. Now, that doesn't mean that the universe revolves around us.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. The universe exists and we exist for the sake of God and His glory. It's not the other way around. God doesn't exist for us. We exist for God. We must get that straight.

But that doesn't preclude God from wanting us to be happy. In fact, it's through being happy in God and finding our satisfaction in God that He is ultimately glorified in eternity.

The fact remains, and what I want us just to chew over this morning, is God wants you to be happy. And the reason we need to get that in our heads is because that's not how we tend to think about God, is it?

A lot of the time. We don't often tend to really believe that God desires my happiness, your happiness. More often than not, we think that God is trying to spoil our fun.

[6 : 49] Don't we? We think we have to choose between either enjoying life or obeying God. Enjoying life, obeying God. You can't have both. You've got to choose. That's how we think.

We see obedience to God as a duty we need to perform, not as something that will actually make us happy. Because if we did, if we believed that listening to God, living His way, obeying His word would actually make us happy, then obeying Him would be a no-brainer.

We'd have no problem obeying Him. We'd do it naturally. I mean, why wouldn't you listen to someone who wants to make you happy? To illustrate, I remember when my boy Alex first went down a big slide.

You know, the big boy slide. Not these little slides for preschoolers, but a big boy slide. In Lakeside Park, near where we lived. And being who he is, he was very hesitant.

He wasn't quite sure about this. So I took him up with lots of persuasion. I took him up the top of the slide. And I sat there with him. And he was looking down. And he thought, no, no. He just wanted to stay on the seesaw that he was used to.

[7 : 54] But I said to him, even though he was hesitant and he wasn't sure, I said to him, Alex, you know how much fun this is going to be. Just try it. Just try it. You're going to have so much fun. You'll really enjoy it. And eventually he went down the slide.

Now I want to pause there. Why did he go down the slide? Think about that. Why did my boy decide to go down the slide? He didn't have any proof. He didn't have any first-hand experience that this was actually going to be fun.

You know, why did he go down? Was it as a duty to me? Was he thinking, well, I better go down because Dad says I must? No. The reason that he went down that slide is because he believed that I wanted for him the same thing that he wanted.

To be happy. To have fun. And so he figured that if I told him to go down the slide, this must be something that will make him happy. Even if he couldn't see how it was going to make him happy. And sure enough, he went down.

He got to the bottom. A little giggle. He came back and said, I want to do that again. Okay? So, now, that's just a picture. But obeying God in our lives works in a similar way, but on a much bigger scale than just sliding down the slide.

[8 : 59] You'll only listen to what he says and do what he says if you first believe that he wants the same thing for you that you want. For you to be ultimately happy.

Even if you don't know how obeying him in a particular situation is best for you, you'll do it if you believe that he wants the best for you. You see what I'm saying? And it's been said that all sin, and this is quite an interesting idea, all sin, all the times we disobey God, can actually be traced back to simply not trusting God.

Not trusting that he wants the best for us. I mean, why do we lie? We lie because we think lying will put us in a better position than telling the truth. That we'll be happier because we'll get into less trouble.

We think our way is going to have a better end result than God's way, and so we go our way, not his way. Why do we covet? Because we think that if only I had that, I'd be happier, don't we?

Why do people commit adultery? Because they think, well, they'll be happier with that woman than with their wife. We sin, you see, because we don't really believe that God's way is best for us, and that God's way is the way that will make us most happy.

[10 : 14] We don't believe that about God, and so we don't listen to him. Because we don't actually believe deep down inside that he wants to make us happy. But he does. When Jesus came to earth to teach us about God, the primary picture that he wanted to give us, which was unprecedented in his time, was that God is a father.

And people were really taken aback by him talking about God as a father. But he wanted people to start to see God as a father.

Now, the thing about a father is that a father wants the best for his children, doesn't he? He wants his children to be happy. He wants his children to experience the best of life.

A father doesn't just want his children to be safe and provided for, but to be happy as well. And that's what Jesus wants us to know about God. Like a father desires the best for their children, God desires the best for his children.

And if you are his child, you can know that the God of the universe actually desires every day for you to be happy.

[11 : 25] Think about that. The God who made everything and controls the universe, if you are his child, every day you wake up in the morning, he wants you to be happy.

He cares for you. His heart goes out to you. And if you know that, and if you truly believe that, then you'll really start listening to him, won't you?

But you'll only start really listening to him when you truly believe that he wants the same thing for you that you actually want. But he just knows a much better way to get it.

And that's what this psalm is all about. This psalm, Psalm 1, is about God wanting you to be happy, and it's about learning how you can be, where you can find this happiness, and how it's quite different from where you expect to find it.

This psalm actually teaches you, and the second thing I want us to see, the secret to happiness. In fact, it begins by saying, not where you can find happiness, but where you can't find it.

[12 : 26] Have a look at verse 1. It said, blessed, happy, is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.

Now, one commentator understands these phrases in verse 1 to talk of three distinct parts of our life, namely thinking, behaving, and belonging. And so to walk in the counsel of someone means to accept their advice, to take on board their ideas in our thinking.

While to walk someone's way talks about lifestyle, our behavior, our day-to-day living. While sitting in the seat, or the company, is language of belonging to a certain group.

And so you see how that verse 1 talks about each of those areas of our life, our thinking, our behaving, and our identity, our belonging. And what this psalm is saying about each of those areas of our life, is if you want to be happy, your thinking, your behaving, and your belonging cannot be the same as the world around you.

It can't be the same as the people who reject and ignore God. It must be different. In other words, the secret to true happiness is not found where those people say it is found.

[13 : 48] Don't believe them. It's very easy to believe the world when the world tells you this is going to make you happy. But a Christian, a child of God, must do the opposite. Must not believe that.

Must not walk in the counsel of those people. Happiness is not found in self-help books, or having the latest gadget, or in having lots of money, or in sex, or in owning a house, or living a particular lifestyle.

These are all the things that the world says are going to make you happy. And you know what? We don't think about it, and we just kind of subconsciously believe those things. But you must not walk in the counsel of the world, of the wicked, of people who ignore God.

Because they don't actually know how to make you happy. They claim to, but they don't. That's not where you will find true happiness, despite what the magazines and the internet and the TV and movies tell you.

Okay, so that's where we can't find happiness. But where can we find it? Well, that's what verse 2 goes on to tell us. Verse 1 is where we can't find it. Verse 2 is where we can.

[14 : 52] Have a look. It says, Blessed, happy is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord. And who meditates on his law day and night. 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. And so you see, true happiness doesn't come from listening to the world around you. It comes from listening to God.

Believe it or not. It comes from meditating on his law, which is not just, by the way, the Ten Commandments, but more broadly, everything that he has said, everything that he's revealed to us in his word.

That's what the Hebrew word law means. Torah. Instruction. God's instructions to us in the Bible. And when you do that, when you start listening to God rather than the world, look what happens in verse 3.

Look at the result. You'll be like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.

[15 : 58] Now, what does that mean? That you'll be like a tree? Well, you see, in the Middle East, where this psalm was written, trees have a really hard time. I don't know if you've ever seen trees growing in the Middle East.

But there's not much water there, and the sun is scorching. It wasn't easy for a tree to grow and to produce fruit and basically to be a tree. A tree struggled to be a tree in the middle of the desert.

And so farmers and vineyard owners and stuff, in the Middle East, in Israel, they used to dig these long irrigation trenches. Man-made streams through a plantation so the trees could get enough water.

And the trees that were right next to the streams were the ones that produced fruit. And they were the trees that did what trees were supposed to do. But they needed help to do that.

And this psalm is saying, you are like one of those trees. By yourself, in this broken world, you failed to be who God made you to be.

[17 : 02] You can't fulfill your intended purpose. Just as much as a tree in the middle of a desert can't fulfill its intended purpose. You know what happens to trees in the middle of the desert, right?

They die. You need, a tree needs water to survive. You need water to survive. And that water is the word of God in the Bible. That's what the psalm is saying.

The Bible is what's going to nourish you and help you to be who God made you to be. To be fruitful. To produce the kind of life that God designed you to live. You can't do that without God's word.

And it's then when you are nourished by the water of God's word. It's then that you will find happiness.

Not the world's happiness. But the happiness that God wants you to find. When you're living the way that your creator made you to live. That is the ultimate happiness for a creature.

[18 : 02] To live the way we were made to live. Whether or not you believe that. Let me tell you now. You will be ultimately happy. When you are living the way that God made you to live.

It's then that you will prosper. I.e. You will have everything you want in life. Because you will have more than money.

You will have true fulfillment. You see when the Bible here talks about you will prosper. It's not saying you will have a Mercedes Benz and a big house. And blah blah blah. It's not talking about the world's prosperity.

It's talking about true prosperity. Which is having life. And having life to the full. And having life eternally. And having life in relationship with God. That is true prosperity. That's the prosperity gospel.

Not this rubbish about. Oh well you know follow Jesus and you'll be rich. And he'll give you all these material blessings. That's not prosperity. True prosperity is knowing God and living God's way.

[19 : 02] Do you want that for your life? Ask yourself that. I mean the fact that you're at church this morning. Is a hint that maybe you're interested in living God's way. But do you really want that? When you go home.

Out into this week. Do you really really want to experience living the way that God made you to live? Well if so then there's two things you need to do that the psalm tells you.

Firstly you need to delight in God's word. His law. His instruction. And secondly you need to meditate on it. Day and night. Which are two different things.

But which are both very necessary. Delight. Delight is an emotional word. It's talking about your heart. Your emotions. Delight means enjoying and looking forward to something.

And finding pleasure in something. Delight. Delight. So let me ask you. What do you delight in? What do you delight in? Your sport? Your pets maybe?

[20 : 04] Do you delight in your little kitty cat? Or Fido the dog or whatever? Do you delight in your spouse? I hope so. If you're married. Delight. In fact the Bible says we must delight in each other in a marriage.

And that requires work. It doesn't necessarily happen naturally. You've got to learn how to delight in something. Do you delight in reading a good book next to the fire?

Do you delight in a good glass of fine wine? What are the things that you delight in? What are the things that sort of get your emotions up and make you excited? Everybody has them.

You know what you delight in. I know what I delight in. What do you delight in? You see God has given us lots of things to delight in. In life. Hasn't he? But he also wants us to delight as much in his word.

Do you do that? Do you delight as much in opening God's word as in those other things? That make you happy. He wants us to delight in his word as much as a tree if it had emotions would delight in water.

[21 : 13] And some people believe that trees actually do have emotions. In which case they would delight in getting nourished in water. Trees don't have emotions by the way. But well put it this way.

If you were stuck in the middle of the Sahara desert. You would delight in water then wouldn't you? Just a glass of water would be your absolute delight. It would be much better than anything else in that situation.

If you're parched in the middle of the desert. It's funny isn't it? How delighting in something is relative to the situation you're in. To how much you feel you need it. Let me tell you the best thing I've ever drank.

The best thing I've ever drank. Was a can of coke at the end of the Two Oceans Half Marathon. It was the best. It was the most nutritious. Tastiest. It was the best can of coke I'd ever drunk.

I delighted in it. Because it was then that I most felt the need for the liquid and the sugar. That's what delighting in something is. It's having your need satisfied.

[22 : 10] And if you want to delight in God's word. If you want to do what the psalm is saying you should do. To be happy. Then you need to realize how much you need God's word. In order to be happy.

How much your soul thirsts for God's word. Because blessed, happy is the one who delights in the law of the Lord. Not just reads it as a duty.

Or because we have to because we're Christians. But delights in it. Savors it. But secondly, who meditates on it as well. Which is a different thing. Not only is God's word to engage our emotions.

And by the way, that's why we sing on Sundays. We sing because that is supposed to inspire us and help us to engage our emotions in what God's word says.

Our songs are based on God's word. And it's as we sing them and think of what God's word says. That it's supposed to switch on our emotions. So let singing switch on your emotions. Don't just come and sing and just sing without emotions.

[23 : 09] Let your emotions be engaged. That's what God gave us music for. And so make use of the music on Sunday. And play Christian music and hymns and things at home.

So that you can constantly train yourself to engage your emotions with God's word. But secondly, also meditate on it. And not only must God's word engage our emotions, but our minds as well.

That's what meditate means. We need to read it on a regular basis. And not just read it and put it down. But actually read it. And read it again. Read that passage again.

Read it slowly. And chew over it. Let it turn over in your minds. Think through what you've read. Spend time talking with other people about it. That's why we meet together for Bible studies.

So we can meditate together on God's word. Not just read it and close the Bible. The exercise of meditation is a vital Christian discipline. And by meditation, I don't mean sitting there just with your legs crossed and feeling good feelings.

[24 : 12] Meditation is a word talking about engaging your mind. But stopping, putting other things aside, controlling your thoughts, and just letting God's word roll around in your mind over and over again.

What is rolling around in your mind most of the day? What are you meditating on when you're driving to work? Or walking in the park? Or whatever it is. It's probably not God's word, is it?

If you're honest with yourself. And you wonder why you're not happy. Because happy is the person who meditates on God's word day and night, regularly.

If only we would. If only we would. We'd be so much more fulfilled. But we don't. We don't.

Let's just be honest with ourselves. We don't delight in God's word. We don't meditate on God's word day and night like we should. And what's even worse. What's even worse is when parents, as parents, we don't open scriptures with our children.

[25 : 21] And we don't help them to meditate on God's word and delight in God's word. If you're a parent, when last did you read the Bible with your child? Be honest. You see, because they need you to help them to live how God made them to live.

They need you to help them to be a tree planted by streams of water to be fruitful. And they can't do that without God's word. And they can't, as young children, do that without you helping them to do that.

And if you don't read the Bible with them, you are cutting them off from the one thing that God says they need more than anything else in life. Just as much as you're cutting yourself off from that when you don't read the Bible in your daily life.

Now, you're probably feeling pretty bad at this point, aren't you? Because I know, and I speak for myself, we don't tend to delight in God's law. We don't tend to meditate on it.

If anything, we find ourselves putting it off for other things, don't we? Reading the Bible. Something, just something stops us from opening up our Bibles and reading them.

[26 : 27] You know, there's a thousand and one other things that we'd rather do at that moment. You know what I'm talking about? Have you felt that? That kind of force that's just repelling you away from God's word?

Do you know what I'm talking about? It's easier to open up any other book on the shelf than it is to open God's word. Even though we know that we need it more than anything else.

Why is that? Why is it so difficult to open up God's word and read it? Well, let me tell you why. Because of the sin that is inside us. Sin is the force that repels us away from God and his word.

Satan would have you read any book except the Bible. And that's why he works the hardest he can to stop you from reading the Bible. It's a spiritual battle every time you go to open God's word.

And unless your sin is defeated, you won't meditate and delight in God's word. You'll never be happy and you'll never have true life. But rather, if our sin is not dealt with first, we'll be like the forces.

[27 : 30] We'll be chaffed that the wind blows away. Just this light, inconsequential stuff that disappears. And that is why Psalm 2 follows Psalm 1.

Have a look at it. These psalms in the Bible are not randomly arranged. There is a very well thought out plan to the arrangement of psalms.

Psalm 2, what's it about? If you look over it, it's all about God's anointed king, his son, that he is sending to defeat the enemies of his people. That's what Psalm 2 is about.

And our biggest enemy, your biggest enemy, is sin. And Jesus came into our world to conquer that enemy for us as his people. And Psalm 2 then ends the same way Psalm 1 began.

These psalms are seen as the introduction to the book of Psalms, these two psalms. And Psalm 1 starts with the same thing Psalm 2 ends with, which is telling us how God wants us to be happy.

[28 : 35] But Psalm 1, it's in delighting with his word. But in Psalm 2, look at how to be happy. It's by taking refuge in his son. And you need both. You need both of those.

Because without God's son coming to take away your sin and transform you from the inside out, without that you will never delight in God's word, in his law. On the contrary, you will run a mile from it because it will only show you your failures.

It will only condemn you. But when you take refuge in Jesus and trust in his death for your sins on the cross so that they're washed away and accept the Holy Spirit in your life, it's then that you can begin to delight in God's law.

That same law that would have condemned you without Jesus. Because Jesus has fulfilled that law for you. And through him, you can now start to obey it and find the happiness of living the way that God has made you to live.

Through him. It's then that you can be like a tree planted by streams of water. It's no mistake that Jesus said to the women at the well in John chapter 4, whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.

[29 : 49] Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Do you want that water to nourish you?

To cause you to live the way that you've been designed, made to live? Do you want to find the secret to true happiness, eternal happiness that God wants you to experience?

Well, then come to Jesus. Take refuge in God's Son who he sent to take your sins away. If you have not done that, if you haven't put your faith in Jesus and committed yourself to him, to follow him, then don't delay.

You've only got a certain amount of years that God has allocated in this life for you to do that. Don't waste time. Come to Jesus. And you'll find that everything that you look everywhere else to chase after, this happiness that eludes you, you'll find that it's always been in God's Son.

If only you would take refuge in him. Come to him. To end, though, we haven't been able to actually properly cover this whole psalm, but I want you to see how it ends.

[30 : 59] In verse 5 and 6, it says, Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

And I want to end with this thought. The thing about this psalm is that it's so black and white, isn't it? It's so clear-cut. There are only two types of people in this psalm, and that is God's view of humanity.

It's very clear-cut. There's only the wicked and the righteous. Those are the two types of people in this world, according to God. The wicked are those who ignore God and his law, while the righteous are those who delight in it, because they've come to Jesus, and so they meditate on it day and night.

And I want to end with a question. Which one are you? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder of the importance of your word in our lives.

Lord, help us to realize how desperate we are, and help us to realize how needy we are for your words, to nourish us, and to fulfill us, and to help us to live the way you've intended for us to live.

[32 : 21] Lord, we thank you for your son, Jesus, who you came to deal with our sins so that we can live that way. And so we pray, Lord, that you would help us to go out now into our lives, and to delight in your word, and to meditate on it day and night.

In Jesus' name. Amen.