

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

HOW TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Psalm 1

by

Steven J. Cole

May 2, 1993

Copyright, 1993

May 2, 1993
Lesson 2: Psalms

HOW TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER Psalm 1

"And so they lived happily ever after." So ends many a fairy tale. We enjoyed hearing such stories when we were young, but we all grow up to realize that real life isn't like that. Life's too complex. There are too many problems. Nobody lives happily ever after.

Just look around. We're a nation founded upon the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Ask almost any person what they want out of life, and they will reply, "I want to be happy." And yet for a people bent on pursuing happiness, we're not doing so well. Many try to find happiness in love and marriage, but the divorce rate shows that we're not finding happiness there. Couples hope that having a family will bring them happiness, but often their children cause them more pain than pleasure. Others try to find happiness in a career or in recreational activities. Many try to deaden their pain with alcohol or drugs. But few would admit that they've found lasting happiness.

Even many Christians lack happiness. Christian psychologist Larry Crabb tells of a friend whom he describes as "a committed Christian, a gifted counselor, and an unusually clear thinker," who has not had a difficult life. "Everyone agrees he's a solid, well-adjusted Christian." And yet, after an hour of reflective rambling in Crabb's office, this man quietly asked out loud, "I wonder what it would be like to feel really good for just ten minutes" (*Inside Out* [Navpress], pp. 26-27). Crabb goes on to say that if we were really honest with ourselves, most of us would admit that we struggle with these same feelings. We aren't truly happy people.

I must be in denial and totally out of touch with my feelings, because most of the time, I'm a happy man. I don't say that to boast in myself, but to point you to God's Word, which promises true happiness to all who follow what it says. Either it's a fairy tale

which, as adults, we shouldn't take seriously, or it speaks truth which tells us how to have lasting happiness and why we don't if we don't. Psalm 1 shows us that ...

To live happily ever after, we must build
our lives on God and His Word.

Things can never satisfy us; only God can. Even relationships cannot ultimately satisfy apart from God. Pursuing pleasure, self-fulfillment, or self-centered goals cannot satisfy. Only a life built on God and obedience to His Word will bring true happiness. That's what this psalm declares.

The first verse begins with "blessed," which in Hebrew is a plural of intensity and may be rendered, "Oh, how truly happy is the person!" or "Oh, the happiness of the person!" The word stems from a verb meaning to go on or advance. If you want to advance to the fullest measure of happiness, the psalmist is going to tell you how.

It's significant that he begins by telling us some things that the happy person does not do. Your happiness, both now and in eternity, depends upon your choice of one of two ways. Choosing one means rejecting the other. The psalm begins with that which the happy person must reject:

1. True happiness is not found in a life that leaves God out (1:1).

If you leave God out of your life and reject His ways as revealed in His Word, you will not have true happiness. The psalmist shows three ways it is possible to leave God out of your life:

- A. You leave God out by walking in the counsel of the wicked.

This refers to a person who lives his life based upon the

world's wisdom. The word "wicked" comes from a Hebrew word meaning loose or out of joint. In our modern vernacular, it refers to a person who "hangs loose about God." He doesn't take God seriously and thus disregards God's Word.

We need to be on guard, because the "counsel of the wicked" has flooded into the church today. I confess that I myself was tainted by it for a number of years, until the Lord began to open my eyes. I'm referring to the many books purporting to be Christian which are nothing more than worldly psychology, often with a few Bible verses sprinkled in it to make it look Christian. Even some of the most popular Bible teachers of our day endorse these books. But they are endorsing the counsel of the wicked, to the great harm of God's people.

How can you discern the counsel of the wicked from the wisdom of God? I can only sketch a bare outline. But let me suggest five tests:

(1) The counsel of the wicked denies the sufficiency of Scripture for dealing with the problems of the soul. The Bible claims to be adequate to equip the believer for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and to produce in us true happiness by dealing with the problems of the soul (Ps. 1). It provides answers for problems of guilt, anxiety, depression, anger, bitterness, and relational conflicts. "Christian" psychology brings the world's wisdom to bear on these problems, thus implying that the Bible is not sufficient and often stating "solutions" opposed to what the Bible prescribes.

(2) The counsel of the wicked exalts the pride of man and takes away from the glory of God. The Bible humbles the pride of man and exalts the glory of God (Isa. 42:8; 1 Cor. 1:31). The world's wisdom builds the

self and minimizes the need for absolute trust in God, whether for salvation or for daily living.

(3) The counsel of the wicked denies or minimizes the need for the cross of Christ by asserting either the basic goodness of man or by downplaying the extent and impact of the fall. The Bible teaches that we are all utterly wicked and self-seeking. None of us could or would seek God if left to ourselves (Rom. 3:10-18). The cross humbles human pride and wisdom and exalts Christ alone (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5).

(4) The counsel of the wicked denies God's moral absolutes and substitutes relative human "goodness." God is absolutely righteous and His standards of holiness as revealed in His Word are absolute (1 Pet. 1:16). Worldly wisdom rationalizes away God's absolutes as being too "idealistic" or "harsh" and substitutes some human standard, such as "love." In other words, human wisdom makes a god in its own likeness, rather than submitting to the true God.

(5) The counsel of the wicked focuses on pleasing self rather than on pleasing God and others. The world's wisdom does not promote self-denial and love for God and others as of first importance (Mark 8:34; 12:29-31). Often the world's wisdom provides "help" for a person (relief from the symptoms of his problem) without leading him to confess sin, depend on God, and live in obedience to God. The world's wisdom counsels you to live first of all for yourself. In "Christian" form, it tells you that if you don't love yourself, you can't love God and others.

I could say much more, but that brief outline should give some help in discerning and avoiding the counsel of the wicked. Take note! The psalmist says, "How truly happy is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the

wicked.”

B. You leave God out by standing in the path of sinners.

The path of sinners refers to their way of life or behavior. To stand in the path of sinners means involvement with sinners in their sinful behavior. The word “sinners” comes from a Hebrew word meaning to miss the mark. It refers to deviating from the standard of God as revealed in His Word.

In that sense, we’re all sinners. We’ve all missed the mark by deviating from God’s Word. But when we trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, we become converted sinners. Instead of living to please self, the converted sinner seeks to please God (Col. 1:10). He grows in learning how to deny self (Mark 8:34) and to love God and others (Mark 12:28-31).

The Bible teaches that the objective of our relationship with lost sinners needs to change after we come to Christ. On the one hand, “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33). If we run with worldly people in their godless way of life, we will be wrongly influenced by them. That is why a new Christian needs to cut off close relationships with many former friends: They will draw you back into the old way of life. You may not think so, but, “Do not be deceived”!

On the other hand, we are not supposed to cut ourselves off completely from sinners (unless they make claim of being Christians). Otherwise, you would have to go out of the world (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Rather, your objective changes. Whereas before you associated with sinners as one of them to join in their evil deeds, now you associate with them as a sinner saved by grace to seek to bring them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Take note:

How truly happy is the person who does not stand in the path of sinners!

C. You leave God out by sitting in the seat of scoffers.

Scoffers have rejected God and His Word. They now seek to justify themselves by openly deriding that which they've rejected. Scoffers think they know more than God. They're too smart to believe in the Bible. Many scoffers come from church backgrounds, but they've cast it off as too "repressive." Although they almost always hide under an intellectual smoke screen, invariably scoffers have cast off the Bible because they want to be their own god so that they can follow their own lusts. They don't want God interfering in their sinful lifestyles.

"The seat" of scoffers refers to the assembly or place where such men gather to reinforce their godless philosophy. Birds of a feather flock together. Those who scoff at God love to get together to reinforce their prejudices. To sit in their seat means to belong to such a crowd. Take note: How truly happy is the person who does not sit in the seat of scoffers!

Before we leave verse 1, please note the downward progression in the life of sin. Satan doesn't cause a person to fall away and spurn the faith all at once. There are degrees of departure from God, as implied in three sets of three words:

(1) Walk > Stand > Sit. First, you *walk*--you're still moving, but now in the wrong direction. Then, you *stand*--you're lingering in sin. Finally, you *sit*--you're at ease in the company of scoffers.

(2) Wicked > Sinners > Scoffers. First, you're with the *wicked*--those who hang loose about God. Then you're with *sinners*--those who openly violate God's commands

by missing the mark. Then you're with *scoffers*--those who openly reject the truth.

(3) Counsel > Path > Seat. First, you listen to *counsel*--you begin thinking wrong thoughts. Then, you stand in the *path*--you engage in wrong behavior. Finally, you sit in the *seat*--you belong to the wrong crowd and have adopted the fatal attitude of the scoffer. And Satan's got you!

Two lessons: (1) Guard your mind! Satan begins there, as he did with Eve ("Has God said ...?"). Wrong thoughts lead to wrong behavior which leads to rejection of God and His truth. Guarding your mind doesn't mean that you become a non-thinker. It means that you critique everything by the unchanging standard of God's Word of truth.

(2) Guard your friends! Those whom you choose as close friends should be committed to the things of God. "What fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). Bad company will corrupt good morals. In my fourth year at Dallas Seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks said, "The two factors which will most influence where you will be ten years from now are the books you read and the friends you make." Guard your mind! Guard your friends!

But, the negative is not enough in and of itself to produce true happiness. The psalmist goes on to show, positively, that...

2. True happiness is found in a life built on God and His Word (1:2-3).

Perhaps many of us can claim a negative sort of purity, because we do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. But how many can say that we delight in the Word of God and

meditate on it continually?

There is both a responsibility (1:2) and a result (1:3) described here. To the extent that we fulfill the responsibility, we can expect to see the result.

- A. The responsibility: to delight in and meditate on God's Word continually (1:2).

What does it mean to delight in God's Word. The word is used in the Old Testament (Gen. 34:19; Esther 2:14) of a man delighting in a woman. Ah! That tells us something! Have you noticed that when a young man delights in a woman, he rearranges his priorities so that suddenly he has plenty of time to spend with her? And he doesn't do it because he *has* to; he *wants* to! Nothing interferes with his time with the object of his delight!

Now let me ask: Do you delight in God's Word in that sense? Do you make time to spend in the Word because you delight in it? Or has it become a duty? It's easy to fall into the duty mentality toward the Word: "A chapter a day keeps the devil away!" Besides, it alleviates your guilt to read it. So you grind through a chapter and check it off on your list, but you didn't commune with the living God or apply His Word to where you need to change.

The Bible is God's love letter to you. You're reading the counsel of a loving, all-wise Heavenly Father as to how you should live. His commandments are for your blessing and good. It should be no more of a duty to spend time in God's Word than it is for a young man to spend time with an attractive woman. The way to true happiness is to delight in God's Word.

We are responsible not only to delight in God's Word, but also to *meditate* on it continually. To meditate means

to think about what the Word says and how it applies to all of life. Meditation is to reading what digestion is to eating: chewing on it, letting it become part of you. We're to be doing it continually ("day and night"), which implies knowing the Word well enough to think about it all day long.

As we saw in verse 1, the mind is the first bastion we must defend. Whatever shapes your thinking will shape your life. The only way for a person to reject the counsel of the ungodly which bombards him from every side is to be continually meditating on, thinking about, chewing on in his mind, the Word of God and how it applies to life.

That's our responsibility: to delight in and meditate on the Word of God. Do you do it? Matthew Henry wisely comments, "We may judge of our spiritual state by asking, "What is the law of God to us? What account do we make of it? What place has it in us?" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 3:239). To the extent that you build your life on God and His Word, you will have true happiness.

B. The result: a fruitful, prosperous life (1:3).

The psalmist describes the person who delights in God's Word as a tree planted by streams of water. This is a tree that has been deliberately cultivated, surrounded by these canals or streams so that its roots have a continual supply of water. It is solid and able to withstand drought or storms. It is fruitful and has continual evidence of life and vitality--its leaves do not wither. He sums it up by applying it: "In whatever he does, he prospers." There's a truly happy person: the person God blesses with His prosperity, no matter what circumstances of life he finds himself in.

God is not promising financial prosperity here, but rather, soul-prosperity. The so-called "health and wealth" teaching being promoted by some TV preachers, which claims that God promises financial prosperity, is false. God's servants may be poor in this world's goods and afflicted by many trials. But they are rich toward God (Luke 12:21), which is true prosperity.

But perhaps, if you were honest, you'd admit that you question the truthfulness of Psalm 1. You may know people who leave God out of their lives and who seem to be genuinely happy and prosperous. They seem to have good marriages and happy families. They seem to be doing just fine without God. And you may know others who are godly people, who build their lives on God and His Word, and yet they are hit with adversity and difficulties. What about that? The psalmist goes on to show that...

3. True happiness is found in a life that takes eternity into account (1:4-6).

The psalmist describes the wicked in contrast to the righteous. The righteous is like a sturdy tree--rooted, firm, fruitful. The wicked is like chaff from the wheat--rootless, weightless, useless. This is not man's view. From our viewpoint, many who leave God out of their lives are glamorous, powerful, exciting people. Rather, this is God's view, as verse 6 shows. God's view takes eternity into account and says, "Those who leave Me out of their lives are like chaff." They have no substance. They may be great before men, but before God they will be blown away like chaff in the final judgment.

The wicked will not stand in the judgment (1:5), which means, they won't have a leg to stand on. Their case won't hold up in God's court. They won't be in heaven, where those who have been made righteous through faith in Christ will be assembled. Even though it may not look like it at times, "the

Lord knows" (is intimately acquainted with) "the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." The wicked will be condemned to eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8).

You may say, "Isn't that a cop-out? That's the old pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die bit." No, it's not a cop-out. It is the plain teaching of God's Word, which says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). We all must stand before God. If you take God and eternity out of the picture, all you are is an accident--the chance product of random chance. Your birth was an accident, your death will be an accident. All you are is an accident suspended between two accidents! There's no happiness in that view.

Conclusion

The Word of God declares that you are not an accident. You are here as the creation of God, made in His image, designed to find true happiness in Him and in His Word. But due to your rebellion, as seen in your running your own life rather than in submitting to Christ as Lord, you are alienated from God. He could rightfully judge you, but because of His love and mercy, He sent Jesus Christ to die in your place on the cross. You must turn from your rebellion, trust in Him and accept the pardon He offers. If you will do that and then build your life on God and His Word, you will live happily ever after, both now and throughout eternity! And that's no fairy tale!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can't the world offer truth that supplements God's truth? How do we evaluate the world's "truth"?
2. What's wrong with this argument: "The Bible doesn't reveal everything. Just as we need medical science, so we need the science of psychology"?
3. How does a Christian develop and maintain an attitude of delight rather than duty toward God's Word?
4. How would you answer a critic who said that Christianity is just "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die"?

Copyright 1993, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.