

How To Have A Happy New Year

Psalm 1

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Psalm 1 is an amazing psalm. The psalmist says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.”

“The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”

“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.”

Psalm 1 has been described as the signpost pointing the way to blessedness, happiness and prosperity. It has been called “God’s recipe for success.” I like that. In the world around us today, there is a lot of talk about success, prosperity and “Happy New Year” this and “Happy New Year” that. But Psalm 1 is God’s perspective on success, prosperity and happiness.

I don’t know about you, but I want God’s perspective. I want to know what God says is the blessed life, the happy life, the prosperous life. And Psalm 1 shows us God’s view and not the world’s view of success.

Remember that the psalms are Hebrew poetry. The first psalm is actually the introduction to the entire book of Psalms, of the entire psalter. And because it is the gateway to the book of Psalms and because it’s Hebrew poetry, it uses contrast. It actually divides into two sections: verses 1-3 about righteous, blessed men, and verses 4-6 about the ungodly, who shall perish. We will see the contrast between the happy, blessed person and the one who is not blessed and who does not walk in the way of the Lord.

You can see the contrast starkly if you look at the first word of the psalm—“blessed”—and the last word of the psalm—“perish.” You have a blessed man and you have a perishing man. The righteous are blessed while the wicked or ungodly will perish.

I want to follow God’s recipe for prosperity and blessedness, so the first question we want to ask is, “What are the conditions for the blessed life?” The answer is in verses 1-2. Verse 1 is what we don’t want to do. If we want to be blessed, there are some negative things we need to avoid. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.” So you don’t walk in the counsel of the ungodly, you don’t stand in the path of sinners and you don’t sit in the seat of the scornful.

But what you should do is in verse 2; it’s the positive side. “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.” So you delight in the Bible and you meditate

on it day and night.

We must do two things to be blessed. First, in verse 1, we must be separated from the world; and second, in verse 2, we must be saturated with the Word. So the road to the blessed life is has limits. If you want to be blessed, there are things you have to say “No” to.

The blessed man will not do certain things. What won’t he do? There are three points. First, he “walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.” You’re not going to listen to, you’re not going to follow ungodly counsel. What is “ungodly”? It simply means a person who lives as though God does not exist. We call this “practical atheism.”

And you can even find practical atheists in the church. You can live your life as though God does not exist. You can even come to church, but you live your life like God does not exist. You hear the sermon, but you have no fear of the Lord, you don’t seek the Lord, you don’t pray to the Lord and you don’t obey God’s Word. You’re living your life like God does not exist. That’s a picture of the ungodly. And it could involve those who are wicked and sinful, but it simply means those who don’t believe in God or live like He doesn’t exist.

So be careful; don’t get their counsel. Be careful who you keep company with and who you listen to.

Second, the blessed man does not “[stand] in the path of sinners.” Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” You have to be careful with you stand around with.

When I was younger growing up as a prodigal in my parents’ Christian home, my Grandmother Miller, who was a godly Christian, sent me a birthday card every year and would always write out some key verses from Proverbs. Most of the years that she wrote those Proverbs, she often wrote Proverbs 1:10, 14-15, which is, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.” If they say, “Cast in your lot among us, let us all have one purse”—my son, do not walk in the way with them.”

So as a young man, every year I read that on my birthday, and it really had an influence on me. I began to realize that I was following the wrong crowd. I’m hanging out with the ungodly. I’m “[standing] in the path of sinners.” And the next thing I knew, I would be “[sitting] in the seat of the scornful.” So we need to be careful who we hang out with.

But don’t get the wrong impression here. This is not talking about isolation; it’s talking about not integrating. We don’t want to integrate our lives with them or take on their philosophies or their way of living.

So first, you don’t get their counsel; second, you don’t stand around with them; and third, you don’t “[sit] in the seat of the scornful,” which is the greater danger. It is a reference to the mockers. It is those who mock Christianity. I think of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher, Sam Harris and some of these modern-day atheists. Many times Christians will

begin to listen to them and buy the lie that there is no God and that the Bible is full of fables and fairy tales.

If we are going to be blessed, we need to be careful that we don't walk, don't stand and then don't "[sit] in the seat of the scornful."

And notice that this is progressive, starting with walking, which leads to standing and the next thing you know, you're sitting. The danger is that sin starts in little, progressive increments. You don't wake up on a Monday morning and say, "I just feel like becoming an atheist today. I think I'm going to turn my back on God today. I think I'm just going to throw away my Bible, deny God and go out and be a flamin' atheist!" It doesn't happen like that.

E.M. Bounds, in one of his great books on prayer, said, "Apostasy generally begins at the closet door." You just don't pray anymore. You don't read your Bible anymore. You go to church less often. You always give a reason why you can't go to church on Sunday. Then you start to stand around sinners, sit down with them and listen to their counsel.

I've seen more Christians who have ended up in divorce, because they got counsel from ungodly sources. They didn't open the Bible and hear what God has to say. They don't go to church and get a pastor's counsel from the Word. They might get it from someone at lunchtime or from someone in their office or cubicle. They should get it from the Word of God.

So be careful; this is a gradual progression downward. The danger is that sin starts small and then develops by progression.

Remember Lot, the nephew of Abraham. What a contrast between the two. Abraham looked "for the city...whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Abraham always had his eyes on God, he was always looking toward heaven and his life was characterized by an altar and by a tent. He was a pilgrim; this world was not his home. He was looking for heaven and worshipping God.

But Lot, who hung around Abraham, started looking toward Sodom. The Bible says that Lot "pitched his tent even as far as Sodom" (Genesis 13:12). That's the first stage downward. And he started looking toward Sodom and listening to the people of Sodom. Then he dwelled in Sodom and lived with the Sodomites. The next thing he knew, he was condemned with them.

Someone said, "The danger is that we become friends with the world, we become spotted by the world, we begin to love the world, then we begin to be conformed to the world and then the Bible says we are condemned with the world." So it starts by just being friends with the world and progresses downward from there.

Now notice what we must do. Verse 1 tells us what we must not do, and verse 2 tells us what we must do. We must be saturated with the Word. "But his delight..." I like that "...is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates..." not medicates; everyone's getting medicated on New Years Eve "...day and night."

Now we move from the negative to the positive, from discernment concerning what we separate from to delighting in what we are saturated with. So the blessed man/woman not only says “No” to the wrong and the sinful, to the unwise, ungodly counsel, but they say, “Yes” to what is right—God’s law, God’s Word.

So notice “Blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the law of the Lord.” A hunger for, a delight in God’s Word, is an indication that you are a true child of God. If you have no hunger for the Bible, then get on your knees, repent of your sin and make sure you’re right with God.

Even after years of walking with God as a Christian, your desire, your appetite, your hunger for God’s Word can wane and cool. What we need to do is to constantly pray, “God, give me a desire.”

I remember when I got saved as a young man of 19, I began to read the Bible for the first time in my life, and I would be in tears, because God was speaking to me. I was shocked that I was doing that! I was reading the Bible, liking it, understanding it and God was speaking to me and changing my heart! That’s because the Bible is alive and powerful. It is “sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). So the Bible began to transform my life, and it was an indication that I was saved. My parents used to say they knew something was radically happening in me, because the prodigal son would spend all day in his bedroom reading the Bible, the Word of God.

So delighting in God’s Word, having a hunger for God’s Word means that you desire it. And what delights us directs us. Nature determines appetite. We want to delight in God’s law, which is an indication of the new birth. In 1 Peter 2:2, Peter says, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.” So we are to delight in the law of the Lord.

What is “the law of the Lord”? It is more than the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue. It’s more than just the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. It’s more than just the Old Testament. It’s all of Scripture. So “the law of the Lord” would be appropriately defined as the Bible, the Word of God.

What I’m praying for us as a church this coming year is that we would all gain a new delight in, a new desire and hunger for and a new commitment to the Bible, the Word of God. It does my heart good to see you coming with Bibles. When I say, “Open your Bibles,” I like to see you look down and get a pen and paper ready and are eager to listen.

Not only do I need to do expository preaching, explaining the Bible after reading the text and applying it, but you need to be expository listeners. You need to hunger for God’s Word, and you need to demand God’s Word. I pray that this will always be a congregation that demands to hear the Word of the Lord preached and taught. Don’t ever settle for anything less. There is no substitute for the Word of God. So we have to delight in God’s Word if we’re going to be blessed.

Psalms 119:103 says, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my

mouth!" Isn't that a beautiful picture? Then in Job 23:12, he says, "I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food." So the blessed man/woman is a happy individual.

Number one, read the Bible. You must simply read God's Word. Christians often begin to neglect the Bible. Number two, delight in God's Word. The word "delight" means that we hunger and thirst for the Word.

I have grown up with a love of baked goods. If I see donuts, I just turn that way. When I hear of baked goods, I say, "Praise Jehovah!" So what delights us directs us; if you love ice cream, then in the evenings when you're on the couch, you go straight for the ice cream. You take a bite and begin to praise the Lord. So we should have that same delight that directs our life for the Word of God.

And number three, meditate on the Bible. What does it mean, verse 2, "he meditates day and night" on God's Word?

When I was in high school, transcendental meditation, or TM, became the rage. All my friends were getting into it, sitting in a lotus position contemplating their navel and emptying their minds of what little was there. In Eastern transcendental meditation, you don't fill your mind; you empty your mind. That's a dangerous thing. We need to keep all we can in our minds. And many times the TM mantra was to a Hindu god, unbeknownst to those who chanted them. So my friends were sitting in a lotus position chanting this Hindu god's name, emptying their minds and they became subject to demonic activity.

When I became a Christian and they were still friends, they would say, "Oh, come on, John! TM's really good; it'll help you understand your Bible better! You'll be a better Christian. You can learn to meditate, and you can still be a Christian!" They actually quoted Jesus to me, where the Bible says, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God had already come among them. He was referring to Himself being there with them. He wasn't talking about deity inside of us.

So you don't have to sit in a lotus position, contemplate your navel and empty your mind to find God. You might find lint but you won't find God.

On the contrary, Christian meditation—instead of emptying your mind—is filling your mind with God's Word. And it's putting it in your heart and on your lips. How important that is. So we need to meditate on His Word.

The etymology of "meditate" is from the idea of murmuring. You need to murmur God's Word. The Jews at the western wall or wailing wall in Israel bob their heads and pray, murmur and put their prayers in the cracks of the wall. They are murmuring the Scriptures, uttering the Scriptures or quoting the Word of God.

Also, the word "meditate" is tied to the concept of a cow chewing its cud. A cow has more than

one stomach. It will take a bite of grass, chew it up and swallow it. Then it brings it back up and chews it some more. It swallows it but again brings it back up to chew some more. So this process is repeated.

And that's what it means to "meditate." It means that you take in God's Word, you "chew" on it and digest it. So what the digestive system is to the food we eat, so meditation is to the Scriptures we read and reread. As we "digest" the Word, it helps to transform our lives.

So instead of just hearing the Word and letting it go in one ear and out the other because there's nothing in our brains, we shut the door, it goes into our hearts, stirs our hearts and comes out of our lips. We need to meditate on God's Word.

And how often do we mediate? Verse 2, "day and night." We must daily, nightly mediate on God's Word. I'm encouraging and challenging us as a church to commit ourselves to daily reading and meditating on God's Word.

Number four, if we are to be blessed, we must obey the Bible. James 1:22-25 says, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks..." which means "to bend down and take a very detailed look" "...into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed..." or "happy" "...in what he does."

So if you want to be happy, to be blessed, to have a fruitful life and want the approval of God, you must open the book, take a look as you sit in your nook. Someone said that "Every Christian needs a book, every Christian needs a nook, every Christian needs to take a look" in the Word of God. Commit yourself.

And before you read the Word of God, begin with prayer. Before you read the Bible, pray. And what do you pray for? Four things. First, pray for understanding, Colossians 1:9. "We...ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

I don't believe the Bible was given to us to mystify us or confuse us or to leave us in doubt as to what it means. He said what He meant and meant what He said. I believe in the clarity of Scripture. Not only in the authority of Scripture but in its clarity. God said it, we can believe it and that settles it.

Second, pray for wisdom, James 1:5. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Third, pray for desire. So if we are to delight in God's Word, we need to pray for a desire for God's Word. And pray until God gives you that desire. Don't just pray once and then forget about it. Jesus said to pray. He said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

Most commands are in the present tense. So keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking. If you don't have a desire right away, keep praying until God gives you a desire for His Word. And pray before you read the Bible, and pray after you read the Bible.

Fourth, pray for transformation, for a change in you. Pray and say, "God change me, transform me." In Psalm 19:14, David said, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." And he said, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me" (Psalm 139:23).

And the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to transform the child of God into the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Bible is good for salvation—it brings us to Christ; it is good for sanctification—it makes us more like Christ; and it is good to equip us for service—it prepares us to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

What are the consequences of meditating on God's law day and night, verse 3? "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither..." so this is an evergreen tree "...and whatever he does shall prosper." So we are "planted," which speaks of purpose. We are planted by God.

My wife and I have a tree in our front yard, and it was coming up under the walkway and the front porch. It was lifting the porch and cracking the concrete. We had to cut the roots out around the tree.

And the most important part of a tree is its roots, the part that only God can see. The only part that God can see in your life is your roots. The most important part of you is the part that only God can see. We're so worried about the new Year; "I want to lose weight, I want to look better, I want to grow my hair, I want to dye my hair, I want to grow a mustache, I want to grow a beard" or whatever. How about your roots? "Well, no one sees my roots." God does. Your root system is so important that it should be deep in God's Word, drawing nourishment from the Lord.

So we are "planted," which means there is purpose in our lives. I believe that the study of the Bible brings purpose into your life. It centers you on God.

And the blessed are "planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season." "The rivers of water" could be speaking about the Holy Spirit. I believe that the Spirit of God works through the Word of God to transform the child of God into the image of the Son of God. Jesus prayed to His Father in John 17:17, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." When Paul wrote to Timothy, he said, "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). He also said that the Word of God equips us for service (2 Timothy 3:17). The Word of God is what transforms us, and it speaks of power.

We have purpose and we are planted, we have power and are rooted by the river and we also have productivity by bringing forth fruit in season. God produces fruit in our lives so we are

productive, because we have our root system in God's Word. And in verse 3, "...whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."

We also have longevity and prosperity. From God's perspective, we have purpose, power, productivity, longevity and prosperity. This is as God sees it; it isn't worldly prosperity.

Now I want you to notice the contrast with the ungodly. This is the sad part of the psalm, verses 4-6. "The ungodly are not so." In the Hebrew Bible, it's even stronger for emphasis. It says, "Not so the ungodly." They're not trees planted by the river, so they're not prospering. "But are like the chaff which the wind drives away."

And here's the conclusion: "Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows..." which means that God approves; it means that God is applauding the blessed "...the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish." So the psalm opens with "blessed" and ends with "perish." We see the contrast of the ungodly.

There are three things about the ungodly. First, they are driven "like chaff which the wind drives away," verse 4. Chaff is the thin skin around the kernels of wheat. It is similar to the thin skin around a peanut. Wheat would be winnowed on a threshing floor. An oxen would pull some heavy logs over the wheat on the floor, which would separate the wheat kernels from the chaff. A big winnowing fork would be used to throw the mixture up into the air, the wind would blow the lighter chaff to the side and the heavier wheat would fall to the floor to be gathered and put in the barn. But the chaff would be gathered up and burned in a fire. So the chaff is worthless, doomed and headed for destruction.

So you are either a tree or chaff. Which do you want to be?

Second, the ungodly are doomed, verse 4. They "shall not stand in the judgment." They will fall in judgment. The Bible says that there is coming a day of judgment, when Christ will sit on a great, white throne and He will judge the wicked and the dead (Revelation 20:11). And the ungodly will not sit "in the congregation of the righteous."

Third, they are damned, verse 6. "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish."

What a contrast between the righteous and the ungodly!

This psalm is the opposite of what the world is saying about prosperity, productivity and purpose. Jesus said there are two gates, one narrow and one broad. The narrow gate leads to life and the broad, wide gate leads to destruction. There is the narrow road that leads to the narrow gate and to life and the broad road that leads to the broad gate and to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). So there are two destinies: the narrow gate leads to heaven, but the broad gate leads to hell, and "There are many who go in by it."

And when storms come you need a strong root system to endure them. Storms will come in your life. In a church our size in the coming year, there are many people who will go through storms. The wind will blow, the floods will come—adversity, difficulty, temptations, trials—but there is only one thing that will get you through the storms of life: the Word of God. So your life needs to be anchored, planted, rooted in God's Word.

So you have a choice to choose the narrow road leading to the narrow gate leading to heaven, or the broad road leading to the broad gate to destruction. A tree or chaff? Which is it?