Opening Words

The first word of the first chapter in the book of Psalms is "happy." The last word in Psalm 1 is perish. It is as if the writer is saying, "I am holding out two paths for you. One brings happiness, one will cause you to perish. Which path will you choose?"

02 SS Psalm 1 – Will You Be Happy or Will You Perish?

How happy we are!!

How blessed we are!!

Well, we are, aren't we? This is how the book of Psalms begins. It begins with the word "blessed" or "happy" and then describes why you and I as the people of God are blessed.

Hello everyone and welcome to our program today where we will examine the first psalm in our series of these great poems written by the people of God in all kinds of situations. Many people have commented how Psalm 1 is not just the first in a procession of 150 psalms that God has given us. It is the introduction to the whole book. Psalm 1 sets forth the condition by which you and I can experience blessing in this life and in eternity. It also sets forth the path on which people perish.

As I shared, it begins with the word, "happy" or "blessed". No less than 25 times will you find this word in this book. The other day, I was reading Psalm 32 which begins this way: "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! 2 How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!" I kept reciting that to myself throughout the day and kept telling myself, "Jonathan, how blessed you are. How blessed you are because all your transgressions are forgiven. All your sin is covered! The Lord is not laying your iniquity upon you. It is all forgiven." That lifted my heart on a day where I could have easily slipped into discouragement. But I refused to do that and kept telling myself the truth, "I am blessed because of God's gracious acts to me!"

This is how our book begins and this is how we will find satisfaction for our soul.

I find it interesting that when the writer begins Psalm 1, he begins with a negative example. He starts, "How happy is the man …" and then he describes what a blessed man does not do. Listen as I read the verse for you.

> How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
> Nor stand in the path of sinners,
> Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

Why does the writer begin this way? Why does he begin by telling us what we should not do and the way we should not be? I can only conclude that it is because he was surrounded by these kinds of

people – the wicked, the sinners, the scoffers who were inviting him to join them. The pressure was enormous. They were enjoying life. Everything was going well for them while for the writer life was hard and following God a challenge in a world of darkness.

The psalm begins, then, with a profession of faith. It is as if the writer begins with a silent, "No, I will not follow that way," and then his silent meditation bursts into loud proclamation, "How blessed is the man who does NOT walk in the counsel of the wicked, who does NOT stand in the path of sinners, who does NOT sit in the seat of scoffers."

He begins by talking of evil things in a general way when he speaks of the wicked. He then gets more specific when he calls them sinners, i.e., those who have missed the mark and chosen the wrong way. He then gets most specific when he calls them scoffers. A scoffer is one who speaks with contempt or derision. We sometimes use the word mocker. It is not that one respectfully disagrees. It is that he shows distaste for those who seek to follow God and he lets them know it. In the Bible, a scoffer is one who is unwilling to accept instruction. He thinks he knows more than anyone else. He thinks he knows more than God. God has spoken to him and sought to lead him in the good way but he has turned his heart away from the instruction of God.

Listen to Proverbs 13:1: "A wise son accepts his father's discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke." And 15:12: "A scoffer does not love one who reproves him, he will not go to the wise."

Did you notice the regression of this kind of person? He begins by *walking* in the counsel of the wicked. It all starts when he decides to listen to those who are not following the ways of God. He hears their counsel and begins to practice it. He *walks* in it. Then, he *stands* in the path of sinners. He changes sides. He once was in the path of God. Now he has chosen not just to listen and walk occasionally in the counsel of the wicked but now he stands solidly in that path. Last he *sits* in the seat of scoffers. He has graduated. He now has a chair in the department of scoffing in the university of unbelief. He is seated in a place of honor among them.

How blessed is the man who does not follow this path! Instead of taking that first step and listening to wicked counsel, he is listening to something else. Here is what verse 2 says, "But his delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law he meditates day and night."

When we read the word Law we must not think only of the regulations of Moses we find in the first five books of the Bible. The Hebrew word Torah, although used sometimes in a narrow way for the laws of Moses, was also used in a general way for all the instruction of the Lord. The writer is talking about how God's people must have hearts that are open to God's instructions at all times about all things.

Notice that it says that the blessed man meditates upon the word of God. We are not talking about eastern meditation. Eastern meditation is emptying the mind of everything. Biblical meditation is filling the mind with God's word. Let me define the word, meditate, for you: *to meditate is to engage in continuous and contemplative thought*. God has given us a great example of meditation in the animal world – the cow. It picks up mouths of grass and chews it. When it swallows, the grass goes to the rumen where some of it is digested but some of it comes back up as cud and the cow chews on it some more. Then it swallows that and some of that gets passed to another part of the stomach

that softens it more and some of this comes back up to be chewed 40-60 times more. Then it is properly swallowed where it is broken down further. I'm sure we've all seen a cow chewing away. That is a picture for us of what we are to do with the Word of God. We are to chew away on the Word day and night. And then we'll swallow, so to speak, but sometime later in the day that word should come back up to us where we think on it again. This is meditation – engaging in continuous and contemplative thought. I shared with you earlier how a few days ago I kept thinking about Psalm 32:1-2, about forgiveness. At other times I have posted Bible verses on my wall. This is when I had other jobs besides pastoring or teaching on this program. My favorite was to post Psalm 119 on my wall and every few minutes I would look at it and read a verse. And on many occasions the verse spoke deeply to my heart and remained in my mind as I continued working. I was chewing the cud! Other times I have memorized verses and had them in my heart. I know some people who have written verses on cards and carry them with them and pull them out to read. Do whatever works for you, but do something. Meditate upon God's word. This is the chief characteristic of a blessed man. He refuses to listen to the counsel of the wicked. Instead, he fills his mind with God's word throughout the day and night.

Look at the promise God gives in verse 3. "He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers." I live in San Antonio, Texas and the line separating brown from green seems to run right through this city. Have you ever noticed that on a map of Texas? The eastern part is a beautiful green and the western part is a dry brown. But that line goes right through the city which means that some years are dry and brown and we must water our lawns or they will die, and other years are plentiful with rain.

But there is one part of our city that is always beautiful and green and that is by the river that runs through the heart of our city. If you've ever been here, I hope you have taken time to walk along the world famous Riverwalk. My wife and I enjoy it many times a year and we marvel at the lush greenery of the plants. Why is it this way? Because, they are firmly planted by streams of water. Regardless of the rainfall amounts that affect our personal lawns, these plants by the river are continually receiving the life-giving water of the river and they grow throughout the year and bear fruit.

This is the way you and I can be. It all depends on where we choose to plant ourselves. In verse 1 we read about a man who planted himself in the seat of scoffers. In verse 3 we read about people who plant themselves by the nourishing streams of God's word. Those who plant themselves deeply in God's word constantly receive its nourishment and prosper in everything because they are connected to the source of life. Those who do not, dry up, and become empty shells. The writer says of them in verses 4-5: "The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. [5] Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."

You know what chaff is – the empty husk separated from the nourishing grain of the wheat. It has no substance and the slightest wind carries it away. This is the end for those who turn from God's instruction. They become empty. They no longer sit. They no longer stand. They are blown away in

judgment as the writer soberly concludes in verse 6: "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Happiness and perishing – the beginning and ending words of Psalm 1. The writer holds out these destinies for all men. Which will you choose?