



Text: Psalm 1¹

Series: *Summer at the River*. A Summer Series in the Psalms

Title: The River of Lasting Happiness

Date: July 11, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

This summer we're going to walk through a brief series of messages based in the Book of Psalms. I've chosen the five psalms we're going to think about together based on the fact that a river or a stream figures prominently in each of them. In other words, this summer we're going to spend some time by the river together.

This morning I want us to think together for a few minutes about what I'm calling "The River of Lasting Happiness" and it's a river that runs right through the heart of Psalm 1. Psalm 1 begins with the word, "Blessed...." In the Old Testament there are two words translated as "blessed" and one we find in Psalm 1 carries the meaning of "happy." Not "giddy" or "silly," but deeply, profoundly, richly happy. It's the kind of happiness we know when our lives have meaning and purpose, when we believe that our lives are making a difference. What is the key to lasting happiness? That's the underlying question that this little psalm seeks to answer and the answer involves a choice that we must make.

One of the first pieces of poetry that I can remember studying and taking seriously was a poem by the American author, Robert Frost, entitled, *The Road Not Taken*. You might remember his words...

**TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;**

**Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,**

**And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,**

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I doubted if I should ever come back.

**I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.²**

Many of us have stood at the same fork in the road that met Frost that day, both in our walks through the woods and in our journey through life. We've stood at the intersection and been forced to make a choice.

That is exactly what the writer of Psalm 1 wants us to do. He wants us to choose a path. In Frost's poem the paths that lay before him were both of equal value ... one was not superior to the other, just different. But the paths that the psalmist places before us are radically different and our choice truly makes "all the difference." It is the difference between "blessing" and "perishing," the difference between a life of significance and a wasted life, and the difference between an eternity with God and an eternity separated from Him. This choice makes "all the difference." It's the choice between lasting happiness and eternal sorrow.

Let's hear again God's Word for us this morning. I'm reading Psalm 1...

¹ Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; ⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The psalm places before us three alternatives, the first of which involves a choice that we must make between the one and the other. Then, having made our choice, the next two alternatives simply fall into line by consequence.

First of all – the choice we must make...

² Frost, Robert. *Mountain Interval*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920; Bartleby.com, 1999. www.bartleby.com/119/. [2010]. First published December 1995; published July 1999 by Bartleby.com; © Copyright Bartleby.com, Inc.



If we want lasting happiness we must choose between God's way and every other way

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Psalm 1:1-2

I want you to notice that the writer gives us no third option, because there isn't one. Let's understand the terms that the writer uses to describe those who are arrayed against the Lord.

The “wicked” are those who are essentially guilty of something; that's what the word “wicked” implies. The question it begs is “of what are they guilty?” and the answer that the Bible gives us is that they are guilty of violating God's Law. The “sinners” the writer refers to are those who have missed the mark. That's what the word “sinner” essentially means. Well, what mark have they missed? They have missed the mark of God's Law. They have fallen short of obedience to God's commandments. The “scoffers” are those who, having become guilty of breaking God's Law and having missed the mark of God's standard, now hate the very thing that finds them guilty and wayward. They “scoff” at and mock God's Law. They devalue God's standard and they look to find fault with God's Law and minimize its significance.

And in case you wonder who these people might be, let me tell you: it's all of us! The Bible tells us that...

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Romans 3:23

There is a line in a song we often sing that speaks into my own heart of rebellion every time I sing it. In his song, *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*, Stuart Townend wrote...

**Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers**

Every time I sing that song I think, “Yeah, that's my voice; that's my rebellion.” The choice that we have to make is simple: either we live in humble obedience to God OR we listen to all the others voices, our own included, that are arrayed against him.

It's a personal choice. Notice the psalmist writes of the blessedness, or happiness, of “the man.” Please understand, as the footnote in my Bible indicates, that this singular individual is intended to serve as a representative example of a godly person. You could, as one Old Testament scholar did (Leupold), translate it as “person” but very quickly you have to choose whether or



not this person is a “he” or a “she,” simply by the way the pronouns fall in the rest of the sentence.

Some translations try to get around this by translating it as “Blessed are those who...” but that makes it sound like a group choice. No, it’s a choice that each one of us must make on our own. It can’t be made for us by our families or by our churches; it can’t be made for you by someone else and you can’t make it for anyone else.

On the one hand, it’s a negative choice. We must choose to turn away from the voices of rebellion. It begins as a negative choice and so it must be for every one of us. The Bible tells us that we are born into a state of rebellion against God and our relationship with God begins when we turn away from listening to everyone but God and turn to Him.

But on the other hand, it’s also a positive choice. We turn from rebellion against God to listening to God. In verse 2 the word translates as “law” carries the essential meaning of instruction and I think the author intends us to hear the personal word of Almighty God speaking to us. When we read the word, “law,” in the Bible we often immediately think of the Ten Commandments but here the focus is on the whole revelation that God has given us in His Word (c.f. Joshua 1:7; Psalm 78:5). God’s revelation of his Word is his voice to us. The picture that psalmist creates is one in which we turn away from the voices of the world and turn to the voice of God himself.

Often when we read the word “law” in the Bible the first word that comes to mind is “obey,” but that isn’t the case here. Notice that the first word that marks our interaction with God and his Word is the word, “delight.” It suggests a pleasure and a joy in hearing God’s instruction. It’s a word that tells us that God’s Word isn’t only to be taken into our minds for the purpose of knowing and doing it; it’s a word that tells us that first and foremost, God’s Word is to enter our hearts.

That’s the essence of what it means to be in relationship with God. Being God’s people isn’t about following the rules of the law; it’s about being in love with God who has revealed his heart to us in his Word! Jesus said...

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” John 14:15

Love has always been the heart of what it means to be in relationship with God. And a love that delights in God will delight in God’s Word and will. And God’s purpose in sharing his Word with us is so that our delight might be full. Jesus said...

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken



to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” John 15:9-11

Our greatest joy, our deepest delight, our lasting happiness is found when we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and keep his commandments because He loves us and we love him. And our deepest sorrow and our most personal disappointment is found when we don't ... trust me on that one! But you don't have to, do you, because you know it to be true in your own experience.

If you want lasting happiness, you need to make a choice: **will you live in loving submission to the God who has revealed his Word to us for our joy and delight or will you continue to listen to all the others words, including your own, that will rob you of the delight and joy that God wants you to experience?**

Lasting happiness requires a choice ... the choice to joyfully root our lives in God and his Word

Now, to help us make that choice, the writer of the psalm presents two sets of alternative endings to the story of our life.

First of all, he asks us...

Do we want to be like a flourishing tree or driven dust?

The person who chooses to root himself in the God and his Word...

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;” Psalm 1:3-5

Trees in a dry land are remarkable, aren't they? I've always been struck by the pictures taken of our community at the turn of the century that demonstrate that the trees we see around us today are here because someone planted them and nurtured them. When we lived in the south, it was such a pleasure to drive off the prairie and down into the river valleys and be surrounded by those big, old cottonwoods growing alongside the Oldman River. One of the golf courses I used to play when we lived there was a small course just outside Coaldale that had been organized by some of the farmers. It wasn't in the river valley, it was on the dry prairie, and it had one of the strangest fairways I've ever played. Right smack in the middle of the fairway was a small group of Cottonwood trees. You had to hit over them to get to the green and every now and then someone would



recommend that the trees be cut down and every time they did, the membership would vote the resolution down ... because they loved those trees.

The Bible writers lived in a climate where trees made that same kind of impact. Trees that were planted alongside rivers or irrigation canals were remarkable to a people who lived in a dry land. They spoke of life in all its fullness. Listen to these words, spoken by the Holy Spirit about God's people...

“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters.” Numbers 24:5-6

If we're having a tough time deciding whether or not to root our lives in God's Word, the writer wants to plant a picture in our minds ... the picture of a flourishing tree. If we set our roots into God and his Word, the water of God's Spirit will flow into our lives and will make them strong and beautiful.

And the writer also gives us a picture of what our lives will be like if we don't make that choice ... chaff!

I was playing golf at the course outside of town in the late fall one year during harvest time. There is a fairway that runs parallel to a farmer's field and as I was teeing off, he was combining just ahead of me alongside the fairway. The wind was blowing into my face and so as I walked up the fairway toward my ball, I was engulfed in a cloud of chaff spewing out from his combine. It was like sandpaper in the air. While his hopper was filling with grain, all the parts that were worthless were spewing into the wind, and into my eyes and places unmentionable. For millennia chaff has been simply thrown to the wind because it is of little or no value.

In our eyes, the “counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners and the seat of scoffers” so often seems to have such substance. But in the final analysis, it's all just chaff! If we invest our lives in listening to them we will come one day to realize that our lives have been wasted. On the day of harvest, on the day of God's judgment, only what has substance will remain.

Trees are valued; chaff is worthless. What kind of life do we want to live? Our choice of whether or not we root our lives in God and His Word will determine the outcome of our lives.

Jesus told a story that highlights the choice we need to make. He said...

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these



**words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”
Matthew 7:24-27**

So, built on the rock, strong like a tree, or build on sand and blown like chaff?
How do you want your story to end? You choose.

Finally, the writer ends with one last picture to help us choose to root our lives in God and his Word. He asks us...

Do we want to travel a road that leads to God or to our doom?

“for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” Psalm 1:6

I recently heard the tragic story of a senior couple who were reported missing and later found at the end of a track in the foothills. They had clearly become disoriented and had followed a road that became a track. Their vehicle had become stuck or had run out of fuel and they had attempted to walk out, only to perish a short distance from their vehicle.

We assume we know where we’re going or at least, we think that we can find our way. But God says that we need to careful about the road we choose in life...

**“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”
Proverbs 16:25**

So what road are you on? Are you sure you know where it’s going?

The road that ends in God isn’t the route that most people choose. Jesus said...

**“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”
Matthew 7:13-14**

I’m so glad that God hasn’t left us to our own devices to find the way to him. The way that leads to God isn’t found by following the rules of a religion, or sorting things our for ourselves.

As Jesus was about to journey to his Father, he told his disciples of his plan to return for them one day and he said to them...

“And you know the way to where I am going.” John 14:4



I love the honesty of the disciple Thomas who had the courage to say...

**“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”
John 14:5**

But I love Jesus answer to his question even more. Jesus said...

**“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father
except through me.” John 14:6**

You see, the right path does make all the difference!

Choose Him!

Follow Him!

Delight in Him!

- **Invitation to the Lord’s Table**
- **Songs of Communion**
 - Amazing Grace
 - How Deep the Father’s Love for Us
- **Benediction**