

**“The Good Life”**  
**Psalm 1**  
**January 8, 2012**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We’re beginning a series today on the book of Psalms, a series that will continue through the spring. This book contains the songs sung by Israel in the temple as part of their worship in the Old Testament. Psalms has been referred to by many as Israel’s hymnbook. The newest of these hymns were written about 2500 years ago, and the most ancient about a thousand years prior to that. As such, this book contains the oldest hymns sung by God’s people. Many of these psalms have made it into our hymnbook, and we will be singing Psalm 1 at the conclusion of our service today. Many of our hymns are metrical versions of the psalms, meaning that the wording had to be slightly altered in order to fit the meter of the tune to which it is sung. Other hymns are based on a verse or two from the psalms, and then expand that central thought through the hymn. Of the 742 hymns in our hymnal, 267 of them, or about 36%, are either metrical versions of a particular psalm or an expansion of a verse or more from the psalms.

I learned as a child that the book of Psalms is the easiest of books to find in the Bible. Unless you have supplemental material at the end of your Bible, Psalms appears in the middle of the Bible. The middle page of our pew Bibles is page 514, which appears at Psalm 119. This is more than merely an interesting point of Bible trivia. Though it wasn’t placed in the Bible’s center intentionally, the central location of Psalms has symbolic significance. Just as worship lies at the heart of our Bible, worship also should lie at the heart of our lives. It is central to what it means to be human. No human flourishing is possible without a life centered on God.

The placement of this particular psalm as first is intentional. It didn’t happen to come first just because some psalm has to be first, and it might as well be this one. Rather, it comes first because of the significance of its content. It is characterized as a wisdom psalm because of its contrast between two ways of living one’s life. The names given to these two ways don’t appear until the last verse of the psalm, which calls them the “way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked.” The psalm invites us to consider which path we are on. We are not equipped to enter into the worship of the remaining psalms until we are on the right path.

Let me say this another way by noting the first word of the book of the psalms. It is translated “Blessed” in our versions, but in others appears as the word “Happy.” The meaning is something of a combination of these two words, combining the idea present in the word blessed, that of God being the source of

this good thing, and the idea of pleasurable satisfaction present in our word 'happy'. Or as I have summarized it in the title of this sermon, it clarifies for us what constitutes the truly good life. We all have a vision in our minds for what a good life is, and we will not make it to first base in our worship until we agree with God about the nature of such a life. Our Declaration of Independence says that we are endowed by God with certain inalienable rights, including the pursuit of happiness. But what form does that pursuit take? Psalm 1 answers the question, and everything in our lives depends on the answer our heart gives to this question. It is not the answer of the mind, being able to write down on a test what constitutes the good life, but the answer of our hearts that is definitive here. So let's consider the description of the good life in Psalm 1.

## **I. The Enemies of the Good Life**

The Psalm begins with a description of three things that must be avoided if a good life is to be lived. He does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. Notice the progression of these three phrases, as they describe a descent into greater evil. These three verbs—walking, standing and sitting—describe an increasing commitment to sin as this person departs from God in three degrees. First, he walks in the counsel of the wicked. It always starts in the mind, and this step describes the person who takes the advice of the wicked and embraces it. He buys into and agrees with the worldly perspective that says that happiness derives from a combination of accomplishments, possessions and beauty. After adopting those values, he stands in the way of sinners. To stand in the way of someone doesn't mean in Hebrew what it means in English. Rather than becoming an obstacle to someone, it refers to adopting someone else's lifestyle. Just as the first phrase referred to one's thinking, this one represents the more significant commitment of one's behavior. The person has now acted on what he has thought in his mind, practicing the same behavior of sinners. Lastly and most fatally, he sits in the seat of the scoffer. A scoffer is one who is, in the biblical view, the farthest from repentance. He despises and ridicules spiritual things. He adopts a proud and cynical attitude toward spiritual things, having completely lost any childlike wonder and playfulness in his heart.

This first verse is not a call to separate from people who have inappropriate and ungodly values. But it is a call to distance ourselves from those values, and there may be times when associations with certain people must be terminated for the sake of remaining faithful to the values laid out for us by God. As much as we would all like to think of ourselves as able to stand firm in our convictions against the crowd, the facts paint a different picture. In a recent experiment at a university, students were asked if they would refuse to answer offensive questions at a job interview. 68 percent insisted they would. But when such questions were asked in an actual interview, no one refused to

answer. We are far more affected by the values of those around us than we know.

We live in a world where the portrayal of the good life is very different from the one portrayed in Psalm 1. The view of the good life that is dominant in our culture does not place a high value in delighting in God and worshiping him. Rather, its main features could be summarized as good income, good health and good looks. Consider how much attention is given to those three topics in newspapers, magazines and television shows. In popular culture, those who have it all are the ones with all three of these features. In a previous generation, movie actress Marilyn Monroe had all three in abundance. Yet at the age of 36, before her beauty, money and health faded, she was so unhappy that she took an overdose of sleeping pills and died.

What vision of the good life lies at the core of your life? Whatever it is will be the thing that gives you motivation. At the end of the day, it will determine whether or not you are happy. If it is anything other than delighting in and worshiping God, you will end up unhappy.

## **II. The Heart of the Good Life**

Verse 2 tells us that the heart of the good life is to delight in the law of the Lord. I would like for us to consider three questions as we explore this important verse. First, what does it mean to delight? Second, why does he say to delight in the law of the Lord instead of only in the Lord? Third, how do we delight in the law of the Lord?

Let's begin by considering what it means to delight. It's a common word in the Old Testament, and its meaning is to delight or take joy in something. For example, it is used of a man falling in love with a woman (Gen. 34:19). To delight in God means to find him beautiful and to desire him. There was a movie several years ago called *Sleepless in Seattle*. Meg Ryan stars as a woman who was engaged to be married to a man named Walter. Her attraction to him was purely on the basis that marriage to him would be such a practical and sensible thing to do. Even before they were married, they acted like a married couple who had left unattended the fires of marital love, with the result that they were bored with one another. Then one day, she hears the voice of Tom Hanks on a call-in radio show. His wife had recently died, and as Meg Ryan hears him speak about the kind of relationship he had with his wife, she falls in love with him. When she comes face to face with real love, her practical, sensible relationship with Walter looks very meager in comparison. Is your relationship with God like Meg Ryan's relationship with Walter or is there delight in it? Do you find God useful only, or do you find him beautiful?

Why does the psalm say that his delight is in the law of the Lord instead of merely in the Lord? I think it does so because of how easy it would be for us to fool ourselves about this. There is a direct connection between delighting in the Lord and delighting in his word. When Wendy and I were on our honeymoon, she soon realized that she needed to be careful what she admired in stores we would enter. Whenever she did so, I would want to buy for her whatever she admired. There was a close connection between my delight in her and my attentiveness to her words. It is the same with God. The tangible expression of our delight in him is to delight in his words.

How do we learn to delight in God like this? The text goes on to answer that question. We meditate on his law day and night. What does it mean to meditate? Interestingly, the same word is used in the very next psalm in a completely different context. Psalm 2:1 asks, **“Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain?”** That word ‘plot’ is the same as our word ‘meditate’, only with a negative connotation. What does a person do when they plot? They turn something over in their minds in order to take some step. That teaches us something very important about meditation—it requires application. You cannot meditate on God’s word without applying it to your life. We often stop after we find God’s word interesting or informative, and we stop short of taking specific steps based on it. Delight in God requires going all the way through to the application of his word.

Delighting in God and his word requires something in addition to meditation with a view to application. It requires that we believe and trust that God is for us. We get a glimpse of this in the first word of the psalm, the word ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’. Everyone wants to be happy. On a prayer walk a few years ago, we asked someone we met on the street how we could pray for him. He responded, “I just want to be happy.” God here affirms that goal, reflected in the fact that this is the first word of the psalms. One of the great lies of Satan is that God’s purposes for us are to add burdens that will make us miserable. It was his original lie to Adam and Eve, as he suggested that God’s motive for denying them access to the tree of knowledge of good evil was some nefarious purpose. God desires our happiness, and he knows that the only path leading there is the one that follows him in trust and obedience.

So in order to delight, we must believe that God is for us. We see this even more clearly in the full revelation of the gospel in the New Testament. God is so committed to our happiness that he takes care of the biggest obstacle to that happiness, our sin. He releases us from the burden of sin by paying its penalty himself and inviting us to receive that full forgiveness.

Let me invite you to an experiment this week. Make it your goal to read some portion of the Bible at least three days during the coming week. As you read, ask God to lead you to one verse that he wants you to apply to your life that day. The application could be that of a sinful behavior that needs to be

repented of and stopped. Or it could be simply the encouragement to remember that God is for you. I had such an application this past week, as I was reading in Acts 4 about some severe opposition encountered by the early church. They responded by remembering the sovereignty of God, who uses his enemies to accomplish his will. Such a realization gives boldness, and I was encouraged to boldness with this application. Will you take on this experiment?

### **III. The Outcome of the Good Life**

The two metaphors used of the righteous and the wicked illustrate the two possible outcomes of those lives. The one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates upon it is the like the tree planted by the streams of water. It sends its roots to those deep places where the life-sustaining water is to be found. Then, no matter what happens on the surface, there is a life-source that sustains the tree and leads it to fruitfulness. This psalm implies the existence of dry times, seen in the promise of the non-withering leaf. The leaf tends to wither in drought. Such times come in life, but those who have learned to sink their roots deep into the Lord will prosper even in such times. There will be a lightness in their attitude even during the heaviest of times.

Not so the wicked. The metaphor for them is that of chaff, the dry pieces of the wheat stalk that are created in the process of separating the wheat grain from the stalks. Such dry stalks cannot even survive the smallest of breezes, which will blow them away. They cannot stand in the great judgment, and they cannot stand in the congregation of the righteous.

### **CONCLUSION:**

I remember reading several years ago about the honeymoon of a man named Doug Whitt and his bride, Sylvia. They were escorted to their hotel's fancy bridal suite in the wee hours of the morning. In the suite they saw a sofa, chairs, and table, but no bed. After looking around some, they discovered the sofa was a hide-a-bed, with a lumpy mattress and sagging springs. They spent a fitful night and woke up in the morning with sore backs. The new husband went to the hotel desk and gave the management a tongue-lashing. After listening politely, the hotel clerk asked, "Did you open the door in the room?" Doug went back to the room. He opened the door they had thought was a closet. There, complete with fruit baskets and chocolates, was a beautiful bedroom! If there is no delight in your experience of God's word, I can assure you that there are some doors you haven't yet opened. Can you be so bold in your faith that you can trust that there are doors God has for you that will take you into previously unimagined delights? Remember that God is fully committed to your happiness, and take up his challenge to delight and meditate on his word.