

Song of Wisdom

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Preacher: Rod McArdle

- [0 : 0 0] In 2001, a psychologist from the Ohio State University published a journal article in which he identified two kinds of happiness, feel-good happiness and value-based happiness.
- Feel-good happiness, of course, is a sensation-based pleasure. Value-based happiness, he contends, is a sense that our lives have meaning and fulfil some larger purpose.
- It represents a spiritual source of satisfaction stemming from our deeper purpose and values. It sounds pretty biblical, doesn't it?
- Well, keep listening to the psychologist because he spells out what he means by spiritual satisfaction. He writes, we experience value-based happiness when we satisfy any of 16 basic desires.
- The more desires we satisfy, the more value-based happiness we experience. And since this form of happiness isn't ruled by the law of diminishing returns, there's no limit to how meaningful our lives can be.
- [1 : 0 6] Well, what are some of, then, the supposed keys to happiness? Let me just give you a sample of some of his 16 keys. And if you identify with any of these keys strongly, then the psychologist's advice for your happiness is simply to pursue these areas with great endeavour.
- So here's a sample of his 16 keys to happiness. One, curiosity. Perhaps you have a thirst for knowledge. Secondly, order. It upsets me when things are out of place.
- Physical activity. It might be an attitude. Physical fitness is very important to me. Or honour. I'm a highly principled and loyal person. Power. I often seek leadership roles.
- Independence. Self-reliance is essential to me. Status. I'm impressed by people who own expensive things. Vengeance. It's very important to me to get even with those who insult or offend me.
- Eating. I love to eat. And often fantasise about food. So what's the psychologist's advice? Simply, if you identify with one or more of those 16 keys, and that's just a sample of them, then pursue it.
- [2 : 1 8] Go for it. What's the key to happiness? When I did a search on the internet, I guess it's now become a technical word, a Google, I got 7.7 million hits for the query, the secret to happiness.
- So you can see it's clearly not an insignificant question. So what's the key to happiness? Well, certainly it's not money, according to Christina Onassis, daughter of the Greek shipping tycoon.
- Christina has been quoted as saying, happiness is not based on money. And the greatest proof of that is our family. And for some, basic freedoms can simply be defined as happiness.
- A senior United Nations security advisor commented, happiness for an Afghan kid is flying a kite. They were forbidden during the Taliban regime. And for others, happiness, well, it's just something very practical.

An Englishman, a Frenchman and a Russian were discussing happiness. Happiness, said the Englishman, is when you return home tired after work and find your slippers warming by the fire.

[3 : 33] You English have no romance, said the Frenchman. Happiness is having dinner with a beautiful woman in a fine restaurant. You're both wrong, said the Russian. True happiness is when you're at home in bed at 4 o'clock in the morning and you hear a hammering at the door.

And there stand the secret police who say to you, Ivan Ivanovich, you're under arrest. And you say, sorry, Ivan Ivanovich lives next door.

What does our creator, the Lord God Almighty, say is the key to happiness?

The book of Psalms, known as the Psalter, has much to say about true happiness. And this morning we're beginning a seven-week sermon series on the Psalms.

The Psalms, the Psalter contains 150 songs and they express praise and prayer in quite a wide variety of styles. And we're going to be looking at some of those different types of Psalms as we go through this series.

[4 : 36] We're going to look at the songs of lament, of personal praise, of personal strife, of universal praise, indeed of communal lament. But this morning we're beginning with Psalm 1.

And Psalm 1 has a wisdom-type feel to it, style to it, combined with a strong emphasis on God's instruction. And because of that, sometimes you'll read that Psalm 1 is described as a wisdom Torah psalm.

The Introducing God course that Paul mentioned in the notices due to commence Saturday, July 8, is structured around the gospel presentation of two ways to live.

And Psalm 1 describes just two ways in this life. Only two, not three, not half a dozen, just two. The way of righteousness or the way of wickedness.

And if you're following through that Psalm with me, if you turn to that Psalm 1, you'll see it's got quite a simple structure. It's just made up of three, two-verse comparisons.

[5 : 45] And the comparisons simply go through a comparison between lifestyles, between consequences, and then a comparison between the divine or God's evaluation.

Of the alternative ways taken by the righteous or taken by the wicked. So let's look at that first comparison in verses 1 and 2, the comparison of lifestyles.

The psalmist begins, in fact, given Psalm 1's position, the whole of the Psalter begins with happy. Or, depending on the translation you're reading, you might have it translated as blessed.

And this word, where it's written, has an exclamatory sense. So the idea is something like, how happy, how blessed is, and then the rest of the psalm goes on.

And in fact, the word translated as happy is in the plural. So we can think of it as a multiplicity of blessings, of intensification of blessings.

[6 : 44] And if you've spent any time reading through the Psalter, you'll know that the theme of happiness runs all the way through the book of Psalms.

We read that the individual or the nation is truly happy, whose God is Yahweh, who trusts and hopes in him, who knows God and worships him, who fears and obeys him, who maintains justice and does what's right, whose sins are forgiven, who is merciful to the weak.

And many commentators suggest that Psalm 1 and 2 act as an introduction to the whole book. And if that's the case, it's interesting that, if you like, we begin the Psalter with happy bookends.

So look with me just at those first couple of verses at Psalm 1 and then the last verse in Psalm 2. We read, And then down to the end of the second Psalm.

You see, these two statements at the beginning of Psalm 1 and at the end of Psalm 2 are a paradigm for how the word is used throughout the Psalter.

[8 : 15] See, the word is used in the sense of wisdom. The ones who really are happy are those who delight in the Lord's instruction. Psalm 1. But it's also used in the sense of devotion.

The happy person is the one who lives in complete dependence upon God and not living for self, as we see at the end of Psalm 2.

So throughout the Psalter, the definition of human happiness is thoroughly God-centered, not man-centered. Happiness derives from the complete orientation to the Lord.

Our friend the psychologist was a long way off the mark. Now, I appreciate that there was certainly a warm, fleeting, but fleeting feeling when the Socceroos scored three goals at the 84th, 89th and 93rd minutes of the World Cup.

Indeed, the back page, and if you get that very academic paper, the Herald Sun, but on the back page of the Herald Sun, the morning after the big win against Japan, it had a huge headline, probably font size about 50 or 60, 10 minutes of the 10 minutes of the World Cup.

[9 : 29] But will World Cup success, even beating Brazil, will World Cup success bring lasting happiness? I mean, even the accolades of being a soccer superhero don't bring lasting happiness.

The sad tale of the Argentinian Diego Maradona is living proof that soccer fame is not the key to happiness.

See, we need a deep-rooted happiness that will span all the way through this life and into an everlasting, joyous life in the new heaven and the new earth.

The happy, faithful life is characterized by complete dependence on God. So the psalmist begins with a positive exhortation.

Happy are those who. And then he goes on. And interestingly, he goes on and begins with a negative example.

[10 : 27] You see, we're told, firstly, what a blessed person doesn't do in verse 1, before we're told what a blessed or a happy person does do in verse 2.

So firstly, then, the lifestyle to be avoided. The psalmist describes a life which is immersed and focused on association with all that's opposed to God.

Look with me at verse 1. Do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers.

See, there's a sense there, isn't there, of a spiral into greater evil. The way of the sinner is downhill. Sinners always go from bad to worse.

There are only two paths that each of us can take in this life. One path is to follow the advice of the wicked, to walk alongside them, to stand with them, to sit with them.

[11 : 29] The idea is, if you like, to take up permanent residence in the company of the wicked. That's one path. But there is an alternative lifestyle.

And the psalmist goes on and presents the positive example. That is, what does a blessed person do? Look with me then at verse 2. Happy are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

The message is simple. Rather than associating with proponents of evil, we're to immerse ourselves daily, taking daily delight, if you like, in God's law, his Torah.

Now, the word Torah is sometimes used specifically referring to the first five books of the Old Testament. But it's also used in a more general sense, referring to guidelines, instructions.

And in wisdom literature in the Old Testament, that's typically how Torah or law is used. God, of course, in all of scripture, from Genesis through to Revelation, gives guidelines, instructions on the life of faith.

[12 : 47] And Psalm 1 stresses the importance of meditating on, of giving careful attention to God's word. You see, friends, we are each deeply formed by our meditation.

That is, what we think about, what we absorb. Let me give you a very simple example of that. If you think jealous thoughts, you're making yourself more and more a jealous person.

And as we get older, we can see what we've been meditating on. And interestingly, we form others by our meditation.

For example, if you meditate on gossip, then gossip becomes the order of the day. I recall Peter Adam of Ridley College rightly observing that a church is most deeply formed by what its members meditate on.

A church is most deeply formed by what its members meditate on. Of course, many religions use some form of meditation, or at least use that as a descriptive word for their activity.

[13 : 57] But it's often an emptying of the mind. Christian meditation is the complete reverse. It's filling our minds with God. Not simply a list of do's and don'ts, what we should do and what we shouldn't do.

Filling our minds with God. Let me give you, again, just a simple example of that. When you read the book of Exodus, you meet God.

You meet God who comes down to meet his people. To make a covenant. To live among them. Then Jesus, as we read in the Gospel reading, is the fulfillment of the God shown in Exodus, who comes and tabernacles amongst us.

So whatever the time of day or night, we should be meditating on the promises and the works of God. And so for the one with the responsibility of opening God's word this morning, and for those here listening, the question comes, what is the heart of our meditation?

Is our meditation on ourself, or is our meditation on God, his promises, and his works? Let's then look at the second bracket of two verses, verses three and four.

[15 : 23] And this is a comparison of consequences, or a comparison of the results of different paths. You see, immersing ourselves in God's Torah is not only something that's going to bring delight in your life, it will yield fruitful results.

Consider the rich imagery that we see in verse three. The ones who delight in, the ones who meditate on God's word are, well, they're like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

In all they do, they prosper. So a person who meditates on God's word is like, well, I don't know, think of it as a happy tree.

Lots of nourishment because of the abundance of water. The leaves on the tree don't wither. Tree's able to remain consistently fruitful. And in fact, it prospers in everything.

Think with me about the imagery portrayed in verse three. You see, a tree doesn't water itself. But if you're deeply rooted into the life-giving water of God's word, you'll know fruitfulness.

[16 : 40] You will know fruitfulness. Regardless of the apparent barrenness, or indeed in the imagery, the sun scorchedness of the surrounding landscape.

The Bible, of course, doesn't promise that God's children, what do we mean by that? Simply the followers of the Lord Jesus, those who, if you like, follow the way of the righteous, the Bible doesn't promise that God's children will go through life trouble-free.

However, no matter how fierce the storms of life rage around us, God, the Holy Spirit, will nourish us. He will nourish us through his word.

And we will be fruitful. We're told that in scripture, and experientially, we see that in so many lives, in the people who worship and meet here at Holy Trinity Doncaster.

Friends, there are only two ways, two ways to live. You can either live like a well-watered tree, verse 3, or you can simply live like chaff.

[17 : 56] The Lord gives no other options, well-watered tree or chaff in verse 4. In that process of winnowing, the lightweight and useless chaff just blown away.

What's the difference then between trees and chaff? Simply what we meditate on. See, verses 5 and 6 explain why this is the case.

Psalmist writes, Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

two paths, two consequences of being on these paths, and two very, very different evaluations by God.

Do you notice just the way that verse 6 begins? The Lord watches over the way of the righteous. Watches over, has the sense of to know.

[19 : 02] God's God's God's words, and the blessing would take the form of knowing God better, us knowing God better.

And no doubt that is the case. But the psalmist actually flips the idea on its head because the blessing consists not so much in us knowing God as being known by God.

Someone is antithetical, isn't it? There are two ways to live and only two ways. And the path that every man, every woman takes will lead to only one of two ultimate destinations.

A friend of mine to whom I've been seeking to witness for many years simply will not accept, if you like, the doctrine, the teaching of the two paths. For my friend, he says to me, Rod, there has to be at least three paths.

I say, well, tell me what the three are. Well, the first one's for the eager beaver God lovers. The second is for evil people, you know, those who perpetrate crimes against humanity.

[20 : 20] That's number one. Number two. What about number three? Well, number three is the middle path. This is for good people, but good people who will not, as in the case of my friend, quite openly states this, will not submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

God has revealed to us. There are only two ways.

And the doctrine of the two ways is seen throughout scripture. Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we see quite a number of contrasts that are listed.

And in Matthew 7, verse 13, we read this. Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction and there are many who take it.

For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life and there are few who find it. Now, I accept that certainly the way of sinners can sometimes seem wonderful, indeed, even exciting.

[21 : 32] But the psalmist warns us that it's actually a fast track to emptiness and frustration in this life, as well as judgment in the life to come.

So maybe we could just simply bring the two paths down to this question. Are we in love with sin? Are we in love with sin or are we in love with God?

God? And the answer to that question really determines which path we're on. See, Psalm 1 clearly shows us that how we respond to God's revelation, it's communicated to us as we read the Psalms, will determine our ultimate destiny.

And Psalm 1, right at the beginning of the Psalter, it orientates us as readers to receive this whole collection of Psalms as instruction.

And this place of Psalm 1, right at the beginning of the Psalter, is important. I mean, it gives us a framework, doesn't it, for what follows? Because the Psalm encourages us as we read each song that follows to consider them as divine guidance, as God's Torah.

[22 : 55] Psalm 1's a very practical Psalm. and it leads the Psalter. So study of the book of Psalms must have practical effects on each of us as we read it, if the Psalms are to achieve the purpose for which God gave them to us.

How do we find lasting happiness and fulfilment in life, is the answer in the journal article, Psychology Today. How do we find lasting happiness and fulfilment?

By meditating on, by delighting in God's word. You see, Christian meditation isn't an optional extra.

It's not, if you like, just for those keen beanies. It's something that all believers, all followers of the Lord Jesus Christ should do. God's word is sustenance.

sustenance for our daily lives as the spirit applies his word to all of the situations that we find ourselves in.

[24 : 04] And we're better to start than to start with the Psalms. And not just picking out our favourite Psalms, but starting with the book of Psalms from beginning to end.

we need to have the words of the Psalms in our minds, on our hearts, on our lips, as we meet the challenges of daily life.

Let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a revealing God. We thank you that you have chosen to reveal yourself in your holy word and supremely revealed yourself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, as we read scripture, and especially in a pluralistic culture in which we live, we're often taken back sometimes just by the starkness of your teaching of there only being two paths, Lord, we recognize that in your just boundless grace and love and mercy, you have provided the way, the means for us to be on the path of righteousness, of deep rooted happiness and satisfaction in this life, and everlasting joy in your presence in the new heavens and the new earth.

Lord, my prayer is for each who are gathered here this morning, that we would not go down the path of sinners, that we would simply in each of our lives know the personal experience of turning from our sin, of repenting of our sin, and embracing, as the psalmist says, of taking refuge in the living God.

[26 : 07] God. And Father, as your people, may we indeed be formed by your word as we meditate on it and delight in it, knowing that indeed it is sustenance for our daily lives.

We pray this in Christ's sake and for his glory. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.