**Psalm 1**

**Finding a happiness that lasts**

We are all searching for happiness, aren’t we? It’s the one thing that all human beings have in common: every single person on this planet is searching for happiness.

Aristotle, the philosopher, worked it out thousands of years ago when he said that the pursuit of happiness is the only thing that human beings do for the sake of itself, and that every decision we make in life is made in the light of our pursuit of happiness.

Some of those decisions are very direct: we might eat a curry because it makes us happy or we might watch Line of Duty on TV because it makes us happy or we might go clothes shopping because it makes us happy.

Other decisions we make are less direct, but nevertheless geared towards the pursuit of happiness; so we can decide to do something which might make us unhappy in the short term, knowing that it will bring us closer to happiness in the long term. For example, I am learning the language Esperanto, and it would make me happy to be fluent in that language. And so I study it for an hour or two hours a day and sometimes that can be a real grind. But I put myself through that with self-discipline because I have a sense of the happiness that will be attained when I am fluent in the language. Diets are the same, of course; we may go through short-term pain for the long-term gain of achieving happiness.

The pursuit of happiness is what drives us all.

And then Aristotle hit the nail on the head when he said that even the things that we do wrong in life and the bad decisions we make in life are still in the pursuit of happiness. So for example…I may steal someone’s car because I think that owning that car myself will make me happy. I may take drugs because I believe that numbing the pain for a few hours will bring me happiness by helping me forget the agony of my life. I may cheat in an exam because I believe that passing that exam, by whatever means, is integral to my happiness in the future by enhancing my chances of getting a job or a promotion or whatever. Aristotle commented that even the most heinous crimes were driven by the pursuit of happiness. Even to murder someone is brought about by the belief that eradicating that person will make me happier.

The pursuit of happiness is behind every decision we make in life, for good and for bad.

And, of course, the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus said in John’s Gospel that, “I have come so that you may have life in all its fullness”. God wants us to know true happiness, true joy, true fulfillment - and that is why he sent his son Jesus into the world, so that our sins could be washed away by his blood and so that we could have eternal access to God the Father.

The pursuit of happiness is at the heart of our Christian living.

But as Christians, how are we to pursue happiness? Where will we find true happiness?

Well, that’s what this Psalm is all about that we’ve just heard read: Psalm 1.

And the thing is, that you and I spend our whole lives pursuing happiness, making good decisions and bad decisions in life, hoping that we will find a happiness that lasts. But, of course, those decisions only bring temporary happiness. Shopping may make me happy – for a while – until the thing I bought wears out. Eating a curry may make me happy – for a while – until I’m hungry again. Stealing a car may make me happy – for a while – until I end up in court. Taking drugs may make me happy – for a while – until the effects wear off.

But where do we find a happiness that lasts forever?

Well, Psalm 1 tells us exactly where, in the first two verses, it says this: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night.”

The Psalmist makes it really simple for us to understand. In fact, it’s so simple that it’s easy for us to by-pass it. I have read this Psalm literally hundreds and hundreds of times in my life and yet still I don’t take heed of it like I should. Still, I look to other means for my happiness in life through good choices I make and bad choices I make.

It’s so hard to learn this lesson that, quite simply, eternal happiness will only be ours if we make the decision – and it is a decision, a conscious decision - to stop pursuing bad life choices, stop pursuing nasty talk and gossip and the slander of other people and start delighting in the law of God in our lives.

Happiness is a lifestyle choice: will we continue in bad and unhealthy ways of living or will we choose to follow the ways of God?

A simple choice for each one of us to make…

And if we choose for God, we will know eternal happiness because Jesus offers us “life in all its fullness”. And, as we make that choice, on a daily basis, so we come to understand ever more deeply that the happiness we think we are pursuing through our life choices is only a dim shadow of the real happiness – or what we might call joy – that is found in a relationship with God.

Because happiness pursued through many of our life-decisions is only fleeting and can be easily lost when something negative happens to us, whereas the joy of being in a relationship with God cannot be lost, even when life throws us curve balls and a raw deal and even deep loss and agony.

The happiness – the joy – that God gives us is like a deep river running through our soul in comparison to the fleeting happiness that this world has to offer us. And that’s why in verse 3, the Psalmist writes this of the person who lives life pursuing God: “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.”

Those who pursue true happiness through the pursuit of God are like trees with deep roots and the wind and the storms of life will not uproot them.

Ultimately, happiness is about being rooted in God, deeply connected to God.

Happiness is a relationship. Not like an earthly relationship with someone who may leave us, or eventually die. But a deeply-connected relationship with the Eternal God who will hold us tightly in his embrace both now and forever.

It is in God’s embrace that happiness – true happiness – is found.

“Blessed is the one…whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night.”

But how do we delight in the Lord? How do we meditate on his law day and night? Well, we can’t stay up all night reading the Bible, can we? We’ve got to get some sleep, we’ve got jobs to do and families to look after. So I don’t think it means that.

I think there’s something else here about making spiritual disciplines so much a part of our everyday life that even when we are not actively engaged with them, we are still in their presence and those disciplines are still informing us. Let me give you two examples first, not from the spiritual disciplines.

First, back to my language study, learning Esperanto. I spend a lot of time immersed in the world of that language each day: I study it, I listen to Esperanto podcasts and Esperanto music

I read books in Esperanto, I study the Bible in Esperanto. Now, I am still far from fluent in the language, but much more regularly now I find myself thinking in Esperanto and talking to myself in Esperanto and even dreaming in Esperanto. Conscious immersion in the language is beginning to impact me on a sub-conscious level.

Another example is watching a movie I like. Now, I can watch a movie on my own, and it’s reasonably enjoyable. But I’d much rather watch it with someone I love; we don’t even have to say anything during the movie – just sharing it in each other’s presence is enough to alter the experience dramatically.

And I think that’s what dedication to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible Study eventually bring about in us. If we are disciplined in prayer each day, and disciplined in reading the Bible each day, *even when we are not praying or reading the Bible*, we will have a sense of the presence of God with us. Conscious immersion in God through prayer and Bible Study will eventually begin to transform us on a sub-conscious level.

And I think that’s what the writer means when he says about “meditating on the law of God day and night”. And it’s as this becomes a deeper reality for us that we discover true and lasting happiness, true and lasting joy as we become more aware of God’s lingering presence with us.

Sadly, the Christian faith is often portrayed as a system of ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ as if we need to grit our teeth and do the best we can to live obedient lives and never let God or others down. That’s an impossibility, because we all mess up in our lives and our relationships: it’s part of the human condition. And so we do well to cut ourselves – and each other – a bit of slack when we don’t always get it right. But in truth, the Christian faith is not so much a list of commands to be obeyed as a relationship to be enjoyed. We are deeply connected to God, like the roots of a tree going ever deeper into the nourishing soil. And as we learn to focus on that connection, that relationship, that deep-rootedness, all the more - so we will relax into the Christian faith and increasingly become the people that God has destined us to be.

We are all pursuing happiness – a happiness that will be deep and long-lasting. And how we choose to pursue that happiness is a choice for all of us. We can get short-term, temporary, happiness very easily today by making certain choices and deciding on various actions to undertake; some of them may be good and some of them may be bad. But long-lasting, eternal happiness is a different matter altogether…

Jesus said, “I have come so that you might have life in all its fullness”. He also said, “I will give you peace that the world cannot give”. Surely, that is an offer from God worth pursuing with every fibre of our being?

So, let’s pursue happiness – let’s pursue joy: after all, it’s what we were made for…

But let’s make sure that we put behind us all the bad choices; the sinful behavior, the gossip, the slander, the anger, the seeking after revenge, the desires of the ego, the pursuit of worldly recognition and all the rest of it…

…and let’s instead resolve to delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on his word day and night so that our conscious decisions towards happiness increasingly transform us on a subconscious level. And then we will know what happiness truly is. Then we will truly know peace and joy in our hearts. And ultimately, that is what you and I were created for…