

“A Strong Heart and a Cheerful Mind”
Psalm 1

A Sermon Delivered by
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Our world is made up of many types of people. There are dog people and cat people, Pepsi people and Coke people, Naval Academy grads...and the rest of the world. ;-) But there's one thing all of us have in common: the desire to be happy. Of course, happiness means different things to different people. Regardless of how each person defines it, we all want it. The question is, “How do we get it?”

During my last semester of college, I studied in Salzburg, Austria. One of my educational experiences was visiting a concentration camp in Germany ruled by the Nazis at one time. The feeling I had walking through the camp is indescribable. I saw pictures of horribly malnourished people. I walked through a “medical facility” that was really just used for executions.

I vividly remember a long steep hill of stairs just outside the camp. When the population of prisoners became too great or just for kicks, the soldiers would line up the prisoners in formation, 10 across, 10 deep. Each prisoner was given a large rock or small boulder to carry to the top of this long, steep stairwell. On command, the prisoners were ordered to march up the steps. The soldiers yelled at them – “Faster, faster, you're going too slow!” Because the prisoners were weak and malnourished, inevitably a few or more would eventually stumble causing a chain reaction of small boulders and prisoners crashing down the stairs to their deaths. This execution site was the last thing I saw before I boarded our bus.

Psychologist Bruno Battleheim survived a Nazi prison camp. His perspective on life was greatly influenced by that experience. Battleheim believed the one essential factor in finding happiness was in having hope. Many in the concentration camp believed what they were told: that they would never be free again, they would never see their families again, and they would never leave the camp alive. They lost all hope and gave up. Those who refused to believe they would die in prison, who held on to the hope that one day they would be free again and be reunited with their families...that hope sustained them and gave them strength.

We live in the most modern, prosperous nation on earth. You would think that at least most Americans would be happy. But that's not the case. A recent global study shows the United States as the 12th happiest country in the world with only 26 percent of Americans saying they are happy.

Why is that? When we observe our world, we can see, all around us, people frantically searching for happiness – through relationships, money, sex, religion, family, success, love, sports. And they want more and more and it becomes less and less satisfying.

What we're all longing and searching for is true lasting inner happiness.

In our scripture lesson today, the writer of Psalms says he can predict with absolute accuracy who will achieve true, lasting inner happiness...and who won't.

King David, who wrote these words under God's inspiration, was described as a man after God's own heart, but he also knew what it was like to walk in ways that were selfish, rebelling against God and experiencing the consequences. To summarize what he said in this passage: There are two roads you can walk down – one road is seeking God's ways and the other is walking your own way. David says those who choose to walk in God's way will, over time, come to experience what the Bible call blessedness.

Now that may not sound all that exciting, but believe it or not, blessedness is the heart condition that the world is looking for. I call it the Godspot. It's a place that only God can fill. Blessedness is

- that indescribable, but very real, inner sense of well-being.
- an inner feeling of security and contentment.
- an unusual level of joy.
- calm assurance of self-worth.

When you know deep down, all is well between you and God. This is not based on circumstance. It goes beyond the highs and lows of life. The Bible says that the way to find it is to daily choose the road marked walking in God's ways.

David says, "a blessed person is like a tree planted by streams of water." When I served in the parched desert climate of Iraq with the Marines, we occasionally went to the wadi, a stream from Euphrates River, which is the only place where trees could survive. This is to what David refers. You are like a tree planted in the desert. Unless you are near the river daily, you will be parched, at best, or dead inside. When you really come to know God and you're walking

daily in his ways, it will be as if a spring of water is welling up inside you and overflowing. A spring of living water that will never run dry.

David also says that a blessed person is like a leaf that does not wither. Blessed people have an inner resilience that enables them to keep rebounding from setbacks. Remember a few years ago - all across the country there was this thing called snowmageddon? I was living in Texas at the time, enjoying God's country (smile), and we got hit with snow that Texans are not prepared to handle. Since the trees were not used to the weight of the snow, they snapped even through the amount of snow, relatively speaking, was not really that much. They had not developed an inner strength. Plebes, that's what Plebe Summer is designed to do for you, to develop that resiliency so that when tough times come, you will be able to handle the weight of responsibility.

Blessedness is the confidence that God is in control of all circumstances. He causes everything that happens in your life to work for your ultimate good. Romans 8:28 says, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Blessedness is knowing that your life and your eternal soul are in God's hands and he's watching over you and caring for you. And not just you, but your family, friends, and your loved ones, as well.

The whole world is yearning for this kind of happiness. Daily walking in God's way will get us there.

David mentions another group of people. Those who don't seek God's ways face a bleak future. A future filled with a gnawing absence of any sense of peace with God, and a recurring sense of uncertainty as to what the game of life is really all about.

In his attempt to describe this empty place in some people's hearts, David says they are like chaff blowing in the wind. Chaff is the outer shell of the grain. Once it's separated from the grain, it's worthless and just thrown out to be blow away by the wind. Don't misunderstand, people are not worthless, but the empty place in their hearts is worthless.

What David is driving at in Psalm 1 is each of us is going to wind up experiencing great feelings of blessedness or deep feelings of barrenness. It's going to be one or the other.

Now truth in advertising- I'm a chaplain. Am I starring in a commercial for God? Maybe, but here's what I know...I've walked both roads. I did not come into a relationship with God until well into my adult years. I can tell you, without a doubt, walking in God's ways, is the best way

to live this life. Are there struggles and disappointments along the way? Oh yeah. But I wouldn't want to be living life without God.

Here's the reality- God loves you so much. There's nothing you can do to make him love you more. And there's nothing you can do to make him love you less. He loves you that much. He knows everything about you. He knows more about you than you know about yourself. And he still loves you that much. He loves you and he wants to be in relationship with you. He's provided a way to make that happen.

Here's the deal- every one of us has messed up somewhere along the way. You may not recognize it, but I guarantee you are not holy and perfect. I won't belabor this point because your detailers probably have done a pretty good job pointing out your weaknesses in the last few weeks. In order to be in relationship with a holy God, we have to be made new. We have to be made clean again. Jesus Christ, who is God and came to this earth in the form of a baby and eventually a man, gave up his life for us. He was the only one who could do this because he was holy and without sin. He took our sin, our mistakes, and our rebellion against God, upon himself and paid the price for our sin when he was crucified on a cross. When you accept that gift for yourself, you have the assurance that all is right between you and God.

I accepted that gift in 1991. I recognized that living for myself wasn't working so well. I told God that I was ready to live for him, to be in relationship with him. I asked him to forgive me for my sins and to cleanse me and make me whole.

Many of you are already there. Some of you feel that nudge...pay attention to that- God wants to do some awesome stuff in your life. A few may feel pretty uncomfortable right now. Let me tell you what's going on there. We have a spiritual enemy who wants to claim your soul and make your life miserable. By hearing good news of what God can do in your life, our spiritual enemy is making a last ditch effort to claim you for his own. Don't let him win. It's not worth it. Recognize God's love for what it is- not a bunch of rules and regulations to restrict your life, not a bunch of religious mumbo jumbo. It's about a relationship with God who wants to give you what we been talking about today- that inner contentment, peace and joy.

I invite you to bow your heads with me. If you are ready to make that choice to walk in God's ways or maybe you've already made that decision but you feel the need to rededicate your life to him, I invite you to pray with me.

Holy God, I recognize that I messed up a long time ago. God, it doesn't feel good to admit that. I don't know what my life is going to look like, but I know I want to walk with you. Jesus, I receive you as my Lord and the one who saves me from all my sin. Forgive me, Lord, for all the ways I've rebelled against you. Cleanse my heart and make me whole. Give me the peace and joy that only you can give. "Give me the will to do my best and to accept my share of responsibilities with a strong (whole) heart and a cheerful mind," knowing that are right beside me all the way. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What am I doing (or not doing) that is preventing me from having a strong, whole heart?
2. What people or things am I using to try and fill that void within me that only God can fill?
3. What specific steps will I take to fill that spiritual void that only God can fill?