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Say It With Psalms 3. Happiness or Gladness?

Psalm 1 New International Version

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.
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.

Psalm 4 New Revised Standard Version

Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me,
and hear my prayer.
How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?
But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be
silent.
Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.
There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"
You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and
wine abound.
I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make
me lie down in safety.

"We just want you to be happy." "It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you are happy." "The best gift you children can give us is for you to be happy." "If you are happy, I am happy." We have all heard sentences like these. I suspect that most of us, including me, have said them. "Happiness" is one of those words that is simply ubiquitous in our culture. Parents want happiness for their children. Spouses want

happiness for each other. And advertisers compete to see which product can purportedly make you the happiest. McDonalds' recent commercial says if you eat in their restaurants, not only will be happy, you will in fact be able to inhabit a totally alternate reality and "realm of happiness." Writer Josua Becker says this:

[Advertisers] often seek to convince us their products will increase our happiness. From soda and alcohol to fashion and automobiles, happiness is offered to us in our very next purchase. [Consider] the level of boldness some products used in promoting this misconception. Coca-Cola ("Open happiness") and Volkswagen ("Get in. Get happy.")¹

Of course, ironically Volkswagen made both itself and thousands of owners very *un*-happy with its deceptive emissions standards certifications. But that just shows you the great length to which a company will go to entice you to believe that your happiness will be increased when you buy its product.

What you may not know, though, is that in anything like how we usually use and mean the term, the Bible actually just isn't very interested in whether we are "happy" or not. What do I mean? Well, let's look more closely at our two Psalms for this morning, in this third of our fall sermon series on the Psalms. Psalm one begins with the phrase "Blessed is the one." Let's do a little Bible study here for a moment. The word which gets translated as "blessed" in the New International Version also gets translated as "happy" in several other versions. But "blessed" is a much more appropriate word even if it sometimes may seem a little vague, a little "churchy." After all, these days the most

¹<http://www.becomingminimalist.com/superbowl-ads-mistruth/>

common use of the word is an expression offered after someone sneezes. I do believe the Psalmist has something a little deeper in mind than a medieval superstition that without such a “blessing” your soul might have left your body along with your sneeze and wouldn’t come back if someone didn’t bless you. Did you know that’s the origin of the term? So, what **does** the word “blessing” mean here and why is it so much more profound than the word “happy,” at least as our culture has come to use the word?

The root word in Hebrew here comes from a word that means to go in the right direction, to advance and not retreat, to make progress. And when we look at the word throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, we also see that that idea of progress and advancement is almost always tied to the idea of being fruitful, of being creative, of new possibilities coming into being. In its most common usage in the Old Testament, the word “blessing” is almost always associated with the concept of “fertility.” God “blessed” Sarah and Abraham when they were promised that they would have many, many descendants – they would be fertile, if you will, beyond counting. But throughout the scriptures, blessing and even fertility is never just meant in a biological sense; no, fertility is also a metaphor for growth, for the increase of goodness, for the maximizing of the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, courage. To be a blessing is to live the kind of life that encourages and entices such fruits to grow in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

Are you beginning to see why, at least for us 21st century Americans, the notion of mere “happiness” is much too puny a goal for our lives, because our culture has taught us to associate it with the things we eat or wear or play with or drive. But surely that can’t be what God has in mind for those who would seek to know God’s love and

follow God's counsels? No, for the rest of Psalm 1 tells us what makes for a truly blessed life: not to participate in the cynical and jaded and too often fashionable scoffing and mocking that so often passes for sophistication, and to be one who seeks, like a tree ripe with fruit, to offer bountiful goodness in his or her words and actions.

To return to where we started, then, if I were giving advice and counsel to my children now, I would not say "I want you to be happy." No, I would say, "I want you to be a blessing to this world." Or, in the words of our second Psalm of the morning, Psalm 4, I would say "I want you to know gladness." **Gladness.** It's so much more robust than "happy." But how do we do that, how do we achieve it? In the face of a scary world, in the face of a civic season where meanness and mendacity, cruelty and crudity, have shouted down civility, in the face of the problems and challenges that each of us has in our relationships or in our jobs or in the economic challenges we face or in our exhaustion of too many things to do and too little time, how do we achieve such gladness? Well, that is exactly the situation that Psalm 4 describes; it was written by a man or woman who was feeling beset and besieged, disturbed and depressed and distressed. And what does the Psalmist say? And what steps can you and I take to find that gladness promised by God, gladness that can be ours even when we are sometimes not "happy"? I would counsel four things we can do that will, indeed, deepen our gladness, deepen our ability to be a blessing to this world and ourselves:

First, the Psalmist puts it this way: "When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent." In other words, if you would know gladness, avoid the temptation to lash out at others with words that can never be retrieved, avoid the temptation to look for someone to blame for whatever situation you're in, avoid the

temptation to let fearfulness drive you. As one preacher puts it, “You know what it is like to have one of those nights when you are pacing the room, carefully crafting your retort, trying with all of your adult reasoning to convince your emotions... to calm down.”² But that retort will likely not add to your gladness and so the first step when life has you depressed, dispirited, or disturbed is indeed to ponder and pray on it in silence.

The second step is this: Practice gratitude. You may not feel grateful. But study after study have shown that articulating and expressing gratitude – even when you aren’t feeling grateful – actually can give you a sense of peace and change your feelings. “Researchers in one 2003 study randomly assigned one group of study participants to keep a short weekly list of the things they were grateful for, while other groups listed hassles or neutral events. Ten weeks later, the first group enjoyed significantly greater life satisfaction than the others. Other studies have shown the same pattern and lead to the same conclusion.... In a nutshell, acting grateful can actually make you grateful”³ – which is surely to know gladness. The same writer who shared this research study counsels some very specific ways that you and I can practice gratitude, practices that can indeed increase our gladness. He suggests that every morning you email or text one or two people a brief word telling them why you’re thankful for them. He also says to cultivate the daily habit of becoming grateful for what he calls “useless things.” Notice the fascinating way the rain dimples on the hood of your just-washed car, be awed by the way the clouds come over the mountain in such fascinating shapes, take delight in the symmetry of the sunrise exactly aligned with the

²http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=120

³<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/opinion/sunday/choose-to-be-grateful-it-will-make-you-happier.html>

street. So, lesson two: practice gratitude.

If you would want to know more of the gladness that the Psalmist speaks of, then lesson three is this: Work on making sure that what indeed increases your gladness and gives you joy is in sync with the way you spend your time. Most of us aren't very good at that. As one writer puts it, "most people suffer grave misalignment" in this regard. He notes that in 2004, "...a team of scholars... surveyed a group of women to compare how much satisfaction they derived from their daily activities. ... we might expect that [their] choices would roughly align with [their sense of] satisfaction. Not so. The women reported deriving more satisfaction from prayer, worship and meditation than from watching television. Yet the average respondent spent more than five times as long watching TV as engaging in spiritual activities..." In 2014, a study showed that "...the average American adult spent four times longer watching television than 'socializing and communicating,' and 20 times longer on TV than on 'religious and spiritual activities.'" And as the great sociologist Robert Putnam has shown in his landmark study and bestseller, Bowling Alone, one of the greatest enemies of a sense of satisfaction is an inordinate amount of time spent in front of a television screen. What's wrong with this picture? Well, as the writer puts it, too often "we mindlessly blow the present moment on low-value activities,"⁴ activities that don't lead to that sense of gladness the Psalmist spoke of and often don't even make us happier!

Finally, lesson four, if you would know more of that gladness, seek out ways to serve others. Religious writer and poet Frederick Buechner says this: "The place God

⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/opinion/sunday/to-be-happier-start-thinking-more-about-your-death.html>

calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” There are indeed plenty of hungry places in our world. Some of you volunteer at ESM. Some of you have just this week helped our church house homeless families. Some of you drop everything to build a ramp for a church member in need. Some of you give sacrificially of your time and your money. And at least one of you, I know, prays for each person in our church, by name, every day. God has gifted you and placed you in a world where your gifts can make a difference. Never think you are too small, or poor, or insignificant to make a difference. For that's never true, and there is indeed a hungering in our world for what you can share. And it will make you glad.

“You have put gladness in my heart.... I will... lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” You, alone O God, can help make us glad, not just happy. May it be so. Amen.