

“The Happiness Promise”
Psalm 32
July 1, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Psalm 32 is about happiness. The word that is translated “Blessed” in the first two verses is often translated “Happy.” One commentator even suggests the stronger meaning of “exuberant happiness.” It refers to that universal human desire for happiness and joy. Who doesn’t want to be happy? Some Christians are uncomfortable with this idea of happiness and consider it to be a feeling unworthy of our pursuit. It’s hard to defend such a view in light of passages like today’s psalm, which begins with a promise of happiness and ends with a command to be happy. We do have to be careful here, because the Bible is somewhat paradoxical here, teaching that sadness and happiness can be present at the same time. So the promise of happiness should not be seen as eliminating the very normal human emotion of sadness and grief.

Today’s sermon title might sound familiar to you, because it is close in name to a best-selling book about happiness. *The Happiness Project*, by Gretchen Rubin, was on the best-sellers list for over two years. The *NY Times* recently published a story about a class offered this year at Yale University on the topic of happiness. So many enrolled (about 1200, or one-fourth of Yale’s undergraduates) that the location had to be moved to the largest room on campus. Everybody wants to be happy.

Though there is almost universal agreement about the desirability of happiness, the path followed in order to gain happiness is where differences start to surface. Every culture has a formula for happiness. What is the formula in modern American culture? 91 percent of Americans affirm the statement: “To find yourself, look within yourself.” In other words, a person is to pursue happiness by looking deep within to find the true self and live authentically out of that self. Is it working? Is it producing happiness? Rapidly increasing rates of depression and suicide would suggest that it is not. Philosopher James K. A. Smith made an interesting observation about the home of today’s teenager compared to that of previous generations:

The home was a space to let down your guard, freed from the perpetual gaze of your peers. You could almost forget yourself. You could at least forget how gawky and pimply and weird you were, freed from the competition that characterizes teenagedom. No longer. The space of the home has been punctured by the intrusion of social media such that the competitive world of self-display and self-consciousness is always with us.

The Bible's formula for happiness, seen in Psalm 32, is quite different from our American view. It comes, as we are going to see, by being close to God.

I. A Theology of Happiness – v. 1-2

The only path to happiness is the path that leads us close to God. But how do we get close to God? It starts not with something we do, but with what God does. The word "blessed" (often translated "happy") occurs twice in the first two verses. It is a common word in the psalms, but its occurrence here is unique. In every other appearance of this term in the psalms it describes something we do to be blessed, where here it describes something done to us by God.

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity." Release from sin is the key to nearness to God and to happiness. The happiest people in the world are those who recognize their need for forgiveness and who have experienced such forgiveness. Does that describe you?

Notice that there are three words for sin here, and that all are singular: transgression, sin and iniquity. "Transgression" has in view the idea of rebellion against God, "sin" a missing of the mark and "iniquity" the guilt and punishment our sins deserve. The fact that all are singular instead of plural highlights the depth of our problem. Our problem is not just *sins*, but *sin*. That is, the fact that we commit sins is bad enough, but the deeper problem is the sin nature we possess. Our hearts are like a polluted spring that keeps producing poisonous water.

But God provides an answer for our problem. Charles Spurgeon says it like this: "Transgression, sin, and iniquity, are the three-headed dog at the gates of hell, but our glorious Lord has silenced its barkings for ever against his own believing ones. The trinity of sin is overcome by the Trinity of heaven." God "forgives" our transgression. The word has the idea of lifting. Our transgression is like a burden, but God lifts the burden through forgiveness. Our sin is "covered." When something is covered it is no longer visible. Our sins are no longer even seen by God. Then he says that our iniquity is not counted against us. It is not put on our record, like a teacher who throws out the lowest grade on a test and doesn't include it on your record.

Some psalms are hard to understand, but not this one. We have a reliable teacher who has studied this psalm and who explains it to us. The teacher is the apostle Paul, who, in Romans 4, says that this psalm is talking about the wonderful doctrine of justification by faith. In summary, he teaches that Psalm 32 describes a double imputation. To impute something is to put it on someone's account, like an accountant entering a credit or debit on someone's ledger sheet. Two things are imputed. First, our sins are put on Jesus' record. In that way, they are lifted from us. Second, Jesus' righteousness is imputed to

us, thus providing us with a cover. As a result of justification, we are seen by God as both innocent and righteous. This is no mere fiction, but something that has been earned by our Lord Jesus.

I mentioned a few months ago a pastor friend of mine who told me about a golf tournament he once entered. It was a two-man scramble, which means that two people form a team, both tee off and then every shot is played from the best ball of those two. My friend says that he is a terrible golfer, and he rated himself accordingly at the beginning of the tournament. In order to make the tournament competitive, bad golfers are always paired with good golfers. Since my friend was the worst golfer, he got paired with the best golfer. They won the tournament. I asked my friend how many of his shots they played during the 18 holes, meaning that his was the best ball of the two. Not a single one, he said. In effect, what happened was that all of his poor shots were thrown out and he got credit for all his partner's good shots. That's justification by faith.

The last phrase of verse 2 indicates whether or not you have understood and believed this justification by faith. The one who is blessed like this is one **“in whose spirit there is no deceit.”** Justification by faith is the foundation for honesty because it means that we have nothing to hide. Prior to this blessing of justification, our whole lives are lived with a fear of exposure. We are like trespassers, always anxious that the true owner is going to show up and prosecute us. Spurgeon says it like this: “A liar is not a forgiven soul... they are too much afraid of discovery to be at ease; their house is built on the volcano's brink.” The happiest people in the world are no longer afraid of exposure because they are confident that all their sins have been covered already.

II. A Testimony of Happiness – v. 3-5

A good story often helps to drive a point home, so David tells his story of how this blessing, this exuberant happiness, came to be his experience. He begins his story by speaking of a bad silence, a time when he should have spoken but didn't. He kept silent, and all hell was unleashed in his life. It is clear from the context that his silence was due to his unwillingness to confess his sin. Good Presbyterians sometimes think that confession of sin is the same thing as speaking eloquently of the doctrine of total depravity. It is not the same. Confession of sin means to confess specific sin to the Lord. David was reluctant to do so, and I think we all understand his reluctance.

He may have been silent as to his sin, but he was not silent as to sorrow. We read that he groaned all day long. He was in some kind of agony due to God's heavy hand upon him. This speaks of God's presence and its reminder to David that he was a sinner. The difficulty came because he was in that dreadful state of knowing his sin but not knowing a Savior from sin. Such a

condition is unspeakably miserable. It even affected his physical well-being. **“My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”** It would be a mistake to attribute every physical and psychological malady to this failure to find salvation in God. But it is also a mistake never to find it there.

Verse 5 is the turning point of the psalm and the turning point in every life. He gave up on his efforts to cover his sin himself and uncovered it to God. The result was the life-changing outcome reported at the end of verse 5: **“You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”** It is clear from David’s testimony that sin is not our biggest problem—pride is. It is pride that keeps us from acknowledging our sin, and it is this same pride that blocks us from the forgiveness that could be ours through Christ.

Let me make one more point before moving on. These verses are normally understood to describe a conversion experience, and that is certainly the case. But I also think it is a mistake to limit them to that. The truth is that the story David tells in these verses describes on a smaller scale our daily lives. Every day we battle the pride that wants to deny our own sin or deal with it ourselves. Our success or failure in this battle is the major determining factor of our happiness on a given day.

III. A Life of Happiness – v. 6-11

The remaining verses of our psalm describe the kind of life lived by this blessed man. It is a life of nearness to God. The same man who was oppressed by the presence of God back in verses 3-4 is here made glad by his presence. He has a confidence in God that is the source of his joy. Notice his exuberance in God in the features listed in verse 7. He begins with **“You are a hiding place for me.”** When do we hide? We hide when threatened by some danger. The psalmist learned to go to God instead of away from God when danger was lurking. Where do you go when threatened? Maybe it’s the threat of a job loss, of a health scare, of a financial setback or of some bully in your life. Many seek refuge in some attempt to seize control, or in some escape. There is great joy in learning to go to God as our hiding place when any threat arises.

David also came to say about God, **“You preserve me from trouble.”** Our trouble often originates from within. We get ourselves into trouble simply by doing what we want. We don’t know enough or see enough to keep ourselves out of trouble. But God does, and he promises to preserve us. I have noticed that he often uses the very things we would most like to change to keep us out of trouble. These things are often like Balaam’s donkey, who saw the threat from the angel with the drawn sword and refused to get too close to him. Balaam didn’t see the angel and thought his donkey was just making trouble for him. So he beat the donkey. We often beat the very circumstances that God is using to preserve us from trouble simply because we don’t see the dangers

that God sees. When we come to trust God even with the unpleasant things of life, it brings to us the joy of contentment.

The last phrase of verse 7 says, **“you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”** That’s just another way of saying that everywhere he turns he finds reason to celebrate with joy. When he looks at his family, he sees God’s hand at work. When he looks at his work, his friends, his enemies, or any other place, he sees God’s hand at work, and it produces joy within.

There is some question as to who is speaking in verses 8-9. Some say that it is God saying, **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.”** I find it more likely that it is David speaking, as he has been through the entire psalm. Now that he has been humbled and has experienced the joy of sins forgiven, he has something to say. I don’t think we really have much to offer until we have experienced what David experienced here. And when we have experienced this, we want others to share in the joy. The grace of God that saves us always draws us to others, thus removing from our lives the isolation and loneliness that is becoming epidemic in our modern American culture. Loneliness has been found to have a similar effect on shortening one’s life expectancy as a lifetime of smoking. So David is drawn to others and offers some counsel to us in the form of a warning. **“Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you”** (v. 9). This speaks to motivation, to why a person comes near to God. There are two options. The first one is to come close to God like the horse or mule. They respond in order to avoid pain in the mouth through the bit. There are people who seem to come near God, but their entire motive is self-interest. They come to God because they feel they have to, because they fear some bad result if they don’t. Would you want your children coming to you for that reason? Wouldn’t it break your heart? David tells us not to come to God like this.

The other option is to come to God out of friendship. This is the person whose heart has actually been changed. And how does the heart experience this kind of change? It comes only through this process of humble confession and joyful reception of the grace of God.

CONCLUSION:

David ends where he began, by talking about happiness. **“Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!”** The only truly happy people in the world are those who have humbled themselves, have repented and have experienced the joy of sins forgiven. Almost a thousand years after David wrote Psalm 32, the apostle Paul wrote these words from a prison: **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”** (Phil. 4:4).