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James 4

“YOU CAN FIND LASTING HAPPINES”

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As the years creep by , we often joke about “not getting older , but just getting better.” For some that is so. But for many , instead of getting better , they end up getting bitter!

I meet them all the time: bitter at the blows life has dealt them; bitter that life seem to be passing them by; bitter , having their youthful ideals replaced by a cynical philosophy that they have learned in their particular school of hard knocks. Yes , all around us are bitter old women and cynical old men.

Some of them are even religious people , professing Christians , church members , Bible students. And yet their bitter feelings contradict the positive faith that is found in the pages of their Bibles. Their cynical attitudes stand in sharp contrast to the youthful enthusiasm that they had in earlier years. And their sarcastic words betray a heart that has strayed from the path of spiritual joy that they once trod. As they indulge themselves by spending the money they have amassed through the years , it is evident that it is not bringing with it the same satisfaction.

And it makes you wonder: is there such a thing as lasting happiness? If we could get an answer from Almighty God , I would like to ask Him: Can I find lasting happiness?

Well , friends , we can get an answer from God. Psalm 1 answers my question with a resounding “Yes!” God says: You Can Find Lasting Happiness.

God’s “poetry book” in the Scriptures begins its task (of answering the deepest longings of our hearts) with a Psalm on the subject of lasting happiness. It begins with the words “Happy (blessed) is the man.” It ends with the words “the Lord knows the way. “ And between it gives us a practical plan for finding this lasting happiness. Let’s study it as if ours future happiness depended on it , for it does!

And don't you young people tune me out. Yes , I remember. When we are young , we are not as concerned with lasting happiness as we are with some immediate pleasure. But , mark my words: your life will pass more quickly than you can imagine. Before you no it , you will be wishing that you had some lasting happiness. And it is only by starting now , with God's sure plan , that you can guarantee it for your future!

Young and old alike , let's search the scriptures. God has given us a way to find lasting happiness. I'll try to outline it in 3 positive steps.

AVOID THE SURE PATH TO BITTERNESS

Happiness is the result of getting in step and staying in step with God. Cynicism and bitterness begins when we slow up (running with God's plan) and walk in the counsel of the ungodly. That means that we begin to listen to the advice of people , who live their lives on their own strength and resources , who see life without the lord's presence and power.

They aren' t "bad" people. They mat be charming , kind, even beautiful and outwardly successful. They are just "god-less." They never look up. They just look around. They just look within. They figure everything out for themselves , with no input from God. And they can manage quite well without any help from God , thank you. Because they depend solely on their own strength , they eventually come to the end of their strength and can become discouraged and negative.

And these "ungodly" people are all around us. They can influence our viewpoint on life. Their attitudes are contagious. We are easily affected by their cynical moods and earthbound outlook.

Many of them write the analysis of the news in the daily newspaper or drone their pessimism on television. They are interviewed on talk shows. The ungodly can live in our homes, teach us, work with us, entertain us, or be among our best friends. Some are shaping our outlooks by giving us facts without faith- the "whole picture" except god is left out.

Taking their advice on life can be fatal! The person who is headed for lasting happiness does not slow down to walk with them. If he does, he will soon come to the advice of people who do not pay attention to god, it is easy to begin hanging (standing) around with the people who actually rebel against God.

"Sinners" means people who are missing the mark. Sinners have the wrong goals and values in life. They are heading the wrong direction – away from God's plans and God's values. When we "stand in their way" we begin to drift with them away from God. We find

ourselves in places where we thought we would never be and doings things we thought we would never do.

At first, we are ashamed . . . even shocked. But then we find ourselves in a pattern of life, trapped as it were, helpless to leave the way of “sinners.”

It is all too true that we become like the people with whom we associate. First, we listen to them, then we try their ways. Eventually their ways can become a part of our being.

That’s when we “sit down among the scornful” . . . or the “scoffers” . . . those who mock God or anyone who is trying to live by faith and dependence on God. This is when we have reached the cynical “pits,” the faithless bottom.

Such people are no longer trying anything themselves. They are sitting already convinced that it won’t work, it’s no use, you can’t win, there’s no real lasting happiness from following God. So they get there bitter kicks by sitting around and scoffing at those who still try.

Poor miserable people. They focus their attention off their own failings. Every human failure and every unexplainable calamity in life is just more “ammunition” for their negative viewpoint. And such misery wants a lot of company. It would like your company.

So, God says, if you want lasting happiness, avoid such people. Now that doesn’t mean that we won’t have compassions on them, nor witness to them, nor minister to them. But it does mean that we won’t slow down running with Jesus and leave off following his road map, in order to walk in their counsels or to stand in their ways or to sit in their sorry seat!

Some of us may realize that we have already started down this path. We may have carelessly fallen under the influence of the faithless and negative. We may have already gone farther in this downward progression than we like to admit.

Turn back to Jesus. Recommit yourself to God’s plan. Repent! Avoid this sure path to bitterness! Your future happiness depends upon it.

II. Instead CHOOSE GOD’S SURE PATH TO DELIGHT (vs.2)

Let’s choose God’s law – the principles and values in this inspired book – as our delight and joy. Let’s meditate on them. Let’s make them the foundation truth upon which we build our lives. “This is the way, walk you in it.” It leads to “pleasures, forevermore.” If the whole crazy-mixed-up world wants to go the other way, let’s choose God’s sure path and delight in it.

By this I don't mean just listening to sermons about the bible or even memorizing bible verses. Many listen to bible sermons and nod assent. (Some listen and nod off to sleep! They've become dull of hearing what some have never had the privilege to hear.)

Some have heard so much biblical teaching that they become like connoisseurs of fine food, and they are always looking for a new feeding place, where they will hear it dished up in a novel way.

Yet, when a crisis comes, they go back to living by their wits, or doing what someone else advises them to do. They trust their natural instincts more than they trust God's inspired insights.

No, the word is "meditate." That's the idea of assimilating it, until it becomes a part of you. The Hebrew word is the same as the word for "chewing the cud." It is when God's truth and values actually are made a part of us. And everything we do in life is affected by them . . . our business, our family, our goals, our values, our love life, our career choices, the way we spend our money.

This is the sure path to lasting happiness. God knows the way. Follow! Delight in what he said.

Notice we are to meditate "day and night" I don't believe that is just talking about living by his word twenty-four hours a day. I believe that also means to keep doing what God says, in good times and in hard times, when it seems to be paying off and when you wonder, when things are going your way and when you are tempted to think that life is passing you by, in the "day of prosperity" and also in the "night of affliction."

Listen, there are times when we all wonder if God's way is the right way. The same man who wrote psalms 1 also wrote psalm 73, where his foot almost slipped from under him, because he saw how the godless would sometimes prosper and the man who walked with god would sometimes be afflicted. Sometimes what we learn in the night times means more to us than what we see in the day. We're no different. Many times the circumstances of life will rattle my cage.

That's when I must choose: Will I delight in God's truth and build my life on it, or will I let go of it as a "bummer" and go back to living by my wits and drift along with the crowd?

God says: delight in my word. It will pay off in the end. It will bring lasting happiness! "The lord knows the way . . ." honesty will eventually pay. Virtue will finally be on its own reward. Moral purity will never leave you tarnished. Right will ultimately win in the end! God will have his payday some day.

When I was younger, I used to wonder about these things. In mid-life, I was tempted to let go for a while. Now that I am getting older, it is easier and easier to delight in God's laws. I've seen so many of them work in my own life. I've lived long enough to see so many. Who would not delight in what God said, go down the tubes. I'm so glad I chose to delight in God's ways and meditate day and night. The better I learn God's way, the greater the delight!

III. Which leads to the third point in God's plan for lasting happiness: TRUST GOD FOR WHAT YOU CANNOT YET KNOW FROM EXPERIENCE (VS. 3)

We can trust what god tells us, or we can learn from experience, the hard way. The only problem there is that it's too late then to go back and do it right. You only go around this life once – let's go with God as our guide.