

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 7, 2025**

**“Their Delight”
Psalm I**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Take a moment now, and—just in your minds—I’d like you to fill in the blanks; I’m going to leave a word out, and I’d like you to just think of that keyword. Historically, the Presbyterian Church has emphasized *blank*. For centuries, Presbyterians have maintained a tradition of *blank*. Indeed, for Presbyterians, life is about *blank*. Now hold onto your answers; we’ll come back to this.

This morning, we recited Psalm I, the opening of the Psalter. And in this first psalm, we hear about those who are “happy” (or, maybe better translated, those who are “blessed” [אַשְׁרֵי]). The psalmist tells us what those who are “happy” or “blessed” do—and the psalmist also tells what they don’t do. Let’s start there; the psalm begins, “Happy [or ‘blessed’] are those who do *not* follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers” (v. 1).

That’s all about going with the flow when it’s harmful, accommodating to the status quo when it’s hurtful, conforming to the majority when it’s uncaring—and really, rejecting God when it’s fashionable. According to the psalmist, that’s what the ‘happy,’ the ‘blessed’—what they *don’t* do; the blessed refuse those harmful patterns, say ‘no’ to faithless cycles of hurt and exploitation.

And did you notice that part about “sit[ting] in the seat of scoffers”: the “blessed,” says the psalmist, don’t “join in with mockers” (NLT) or those who “sneer” (CEV) at others. Many people derive a kind of hollow pleasure from ridiculing others; this is rife online, where real people are bullied and mocked and driven to despair. And though many derive some cheap thrill in mocking others, the psalmist says that the ‘blessed’ find no pleasure in ridicule.

That’s what the ‘happy,’ the ‘blessed,’—that’s what they *don’t* do. So what do the ‘blessed’ do, instead? “Happy are those who do not [...] sit in the seat of scoffers,” the psalmist says, “but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (v. 2)—“but their *delight* is in the law of the LORD.” In “the law” (the

Torah), in God's guidance, in God's Word—the way God reveals his “will and way” (Mays)—in this, the “blessed” find “their delight.”

And notice how the blessed regard God's law, God's word; it's not about guilt, or obligation, or anything like that. No, for the ‘blessed,’ God's law and God's Word is sheer “delight”: “but their *delight* is in the law of the LORD” (v. 2). In the original language, in the Hebrew, the word for ‘delight’ (יִצְחָק) here—it's a wonderful word: it means “delight,” “pleasure,” “desire” and “longing” (BDB); it also means “joy” (Pratico). “Happy are those,” “Blessed are those,” the psalmist says, whose “delight,” whose “pleasure,” whose “joy is in the law of the LORD.”

This is marvelous; according to the psalmist, to be blessed means *to find joy in God*! I'm reminded of the hymn, “All my hope on God is founded”: “Daily doth th' almighty Giver/Bounteous gifts on us bestow;/his desire our soul delighteth,/pleasure leads us where we go./Love doth stand/At his hand;/Joy doth wait on his command” (Neander). Right at the very beginning of the Psalter, we discover the promise that we may find delight and joy with God.

And this might surprise you—but did you know that this notion of joy runs deep in the Presbyterian tradition? At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to fill in the blanks, right—about what's long been at the heart of the Presbyterian Church. Maybe the keywords you thought of were ‘good order’ or, I don't know, ‘committees’—but it's really *joy*. Here are those sentences again: Historically, the Presbyterian Church has emphasized *joy*. For centuries, Presbyterians have maintained a tradition of *joy*. Indeed, for Presbyterians, life is about *joy*.

A catechism is a tradition type of teaching resource; it's a way to teach the Christian faith through a series of questions and answers—and Presbyterians have been using catechisms for centuries. Now way back in the 1640s, Presbyterians wrote a pair of catechisms, one called the “Westminster Shorter Catechism,” the other called the “Westminster Longer Catechism.” Would you be surprised to learn that both open with joy?

Here's how the “Shorter Catechism” begins: it asks, “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer? “to glorify God, and enjoy him forever.” And now the “Longer Catechism”: it begins by asking, “What is the chief and highest end of man?” The answer? “to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” Way back in 1648, Presbyterians were absolutely certain that our purpose is to glorify God and to *enjoy* God—that life is about finding joy with God!

And this tradition of joy continues: in the 2000s, the Presbyterian Church in Canada wrote our most recent catechism, and—much like its historic predecessors—it too begins with joy. It starts by asking: “What is God’s purpose for our lives?” And the answer? “We have been made for joy: joy in knowing, loving and serving God, joy in knowing, loving and serving one another, joy in the wonder of all God’s works” (*Catechism for Today*).

So you can forget everything you’ve heard about Presbyterians being dour and overly serious. To the contrary, our tradition is deeply rooted in joy, what we can call ‘theological joy’—the joy of glorifying God, the joy of knowing God, the joy of relishing in God’s revelation in Scripture. We’re not overly serious; we’re deeply joyful (though, admittedly, we can be rather serious about our joy!)

Now it’s important to distinguish this kind of theological joy—this joy with God—from some kind of shallow, temporary entertainment. The late theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who died just last year—he was once interviewed on the topic of joy; and he made very clear that our joy with God is very different from some shallow feeling that passes quickly. He said: “‘fun’ is a superficial feeling [that] must be repeated again and again to last, while joy is a deeper feeling of the whole existence;” unlike that kind of superficial fun, he said, “you can experience joy only with your whole heart, your whole soul, and all your energ[y].”

He described joy as “divine [...], com[ing] from outside into our life in a surprise, in a turning from sadness to goodness, from sickness to health, and from loneliness to communion, and this turning [...],” he said, “awakens [...] joy” (cf. Schiller). But that’s not something we can just generate by ourselves; Moltmann went on to say that our joy not only comes from God—but indeed comes to us from God’s own joy. “You cannot make yourself joyful,” he said. “Something unexpected must happen.” And he added, “How can we speak of the love of God if we don’t dare to speak of the joy of God, because God loves [our] joy and participates in the joy of his creation.”

The nearness of God brings joy; that runs deep in Scripture (cf. Isaiah 35:1-10; Philippians 4:4-5). Yet more than that, our joy comes from God’s joy. Another theologian, named Karl Barth, wrote: “God’s glory is [God’s] overflowing self-communicating joy. [...] And where [God’s glory] is really recognised, it is recognized in [...] its peculiar power [...] of giving pleasure, awak[en]ing desire, and creating enjoyment” (II.1/653). He added, “God’s glory is the indwelling joy of [God’s] divine being [that] [...] shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness,” so that “[a]ll of God’s works [...] take part in [...] the communication of [God’s] joy” (II.1/647). The God we meet in Scripture is, quite simply, the God of joy; as this theologian put it, “the God [witnessed] in Holy Scripture is the God who [...] radiates joy” (II.1/654).

And so this theologian believed that we need to respond to God with joy. It simply isn't enough to respond with "awe, gratitude, wonder, submission and obedience" (II.1/655); all that is faithful, but it's not complete—because God's glory "awakens joy, and is itself joyful" (II.1/655), and so it's not only "possible" but "necessary" to find "joy in [God]" (II.1/655). That is part of our calling, not only today—but ultimately for eternity. "In the eternal glory," he wrote, we will "rejoic[e] with the God who [...] has eternal joy and Himself is eternal joy" (II.1/648-649).

How then shall we respond to the God who "radiates joy"? How else could we—but to rejoice in God's presence, to rejoice in God's Word, to rejoice in God's calling, to rejoice in the presence and promise of God? Today the psalmist teaches us the deeper joy that comes from God; let us therefore "glorify God, and enjoy him forever." Amen!