**One Priority for 2019**

**Psalm 1**

**January 13, 2019**

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I am thinking and praying a lot about making disciples and discipleship, helping people change and how people change. This past week I read a report by Lifeway Research which of looked at SBC churches over a twenty year period, from 1996 to 2016. In 1996 the SBC had about 5240,000 in church attendance. In that period of time, they baptized over seven million people who professed faith in Christ. Impressive, right. Their attendance during that twenty year period actually went down by twenty thousand people. They researched the reasons why they lost so many people over that time. One of their findings is that they have not effectively discipled those they baptized.

Where will you be spiritually in twenty years? Why will you be there? This report found that the number one indicator of spiritual maturity is bible engagement. The second is that you are connected to a small group. I would suggest to you that the number one priority for you this year is engaging your bible. Psalm one paints a picture of happy life because he/she is engaged with the bible.

**Happiness is Possible**

This psalm describes the blessed life or the happy life. Modern man has attempted to find happiness in science, psychology, technology, and politics but are we a happier people as a result? Suicide is the second leading cause of death among those between the ages of 5-24 and the majority of those who attempt suicide in that age group is from depression.[[1]](#footnote-1) Most of us are better off than our parents, our life expectancy is greater, we have more freedom, yet we are not happier. This is because even we have it better than our parents and grandparents, human happiness is a deeply spiritual issue. The first verse of this psalm tells us that happiness is possible. Most of us start out thinking that happiness is the natural path in life. Then almost everything we pursue in life is a pursuit of our own happiness. Unhappiness is because you screwed up along the way, but as you get older you find out that this is not necessarily true and that happiness is often elusive and circumstantial. So much so that many become cynical about finding happiness. But the bible says that happiness is neither natural nor unachievable but is very possible.

Happiness that the bible describes is an abiding happiness, not a superficial happiness. The happy person is compared to a tree that is fruitful, whose leaves do not whither when the climate is harsh and unforgiving (3). It is by no means immune to the harshness of the climate, but it is sustained despite the climate. Their happiness is not based on their circumstances; they are happy despite their circumstances. I once read a book by Dale Carnegie and in it he wrote, “Two men looked out from prison bars, one saw mud, the other saw stars.”[[2]](#footnote-2) What’s the difference between the two men? They had identical circumstances but the difference was in the men. Happiness is not found in circumstances but in what or who you are which leads me to my second point, happiness is found in God.

**Happiness is Found in God**

The happy person is happy because their happiness is found in something or someone outside themselves. There are rooted in and have found life and happiness in God (2-3). The tree is alive and fruitful because it has access to water. Christianity is not about being nice moral people, but being deeply rooted in someone else. The happy person has a new life, a new power, and a new understanding of what is the source of life and happiness. The tree planted by streams of water is living and fruitful and sustained is a metaphor describing the person who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night (2). This leads me to my third point, happiness is found in God’s Word.

**Happiness is Sustained by God’s Word**

The happy person delights in God's word because he loves to hear God’s voice through his word and he recognizes that it is the source of life. Meditation is focused attention and thinking; reading your bible is not enough. You must engage with your bibles, allowing God, to lead you and change your life, your thinking and your actions. Engaging your bible is like adding fuel to the furnace of your heart. The report I mentioned said that bible engagement is the number one indicator of spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. So, I want help you with two things with the rest of our time. The first is helping you establish a plan to read your bible and then a plan for how to read your bible this year.

Set a Plan to Read your Bible.

First, choose a reading plan. If you have no plan, read through the New Testament.

Second, establish a regular time to read your bible. I recommend the morning because I think there is scriptural support for it but I will not be dogmatic about it.

Third, set aside a regular place to read your bible Find a quiet spot, where you are alone and uninterrupted. Get rid of all distractions, including your phone, computer, etc.

Fourth, establish a regular routine in reading your bible. Start out asking God to open your eyes that you may see wonderful things in his word and then ask him to incline your heart to his word.

Finally, ask a friend to hold you accountable to your plan. Accountability is essential for consistent and long term spiritual growth.

A Simple Plan for Bible Engagement

Dr. Fergus Macdonald says that “Scripture engagement is interaction with the biblical text in a way that provides sufficient opportunity for the text to speak for itself by the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling readers and listeners to hear the voice of God and discover for themselves the unique claim Jesus Christ is making upon them.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Here is a simple system for engaging with your bible, based upon the acrostic H.E.A.R.

First, read a chapter and **Highlight** the verse that jumps out to you the most. You can mark up your bible or write the verse(s) out. After a while, you will begin to see how God speaks to you through his word. You cannot say God does not speak to you when your bible is collecting dust on the shelf or night stand.

Second, **Explain** the text by writing out the verse (s) in your own words or to gain some insight into the text. Ask some basic questions like who, what, why, when, where, and how. The goal is to gain understanding and to raise your affections for God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Third is **Apply** by taking a few minutes and think and pray and ask God how to apply this verse (s) to your life. Ask God and consider ways to apply immediately and not just look to do something in the future. You want God’s Word to change your life, worship and obedience.

Last, **Respond** by ending with prayer to God about the verse (s) you highlighted, asking God for the strength to obey the application of the text. Getting into God’s word until the Word gets into you will pave the way for long term spiritual growth that manifests in a life lived fully for Christ.

Life Group Questions:

1. What is happiness? Are you happy?
2. How do we find happiness?
3. How is happiness connected to meditating on the word?
4. Does the imagery of the tree describe your life? Why or why not?
5. How often do you read your bibles in a week?
6. Do you have a reading plan? What is it?
7. Do you meditate or give focused attention and thinking when you read?
8. What do you think of the H.E.A.R. plan?
9. Walk your group through Psalm one or another passage using the H.E.A.R. plan.
10. Follow up with each person in your group to find out if they have a reading plan and are using the H.E.A.R plan or something else.

1. https://www.aacap.org/aacap/families\_and\_youth/facts\_for\_families/fff-guide/teen-suicide-010.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, (Gallery Books: 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://tucse.taylor.edu/scripture-engagement-defined/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ps 119:15-16; you can see the connection between knowledge and affections in Rom 12:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)