

IS HAPPINESS JUST A WORD?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 1, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

According to the best estimates available there are now some three and one-half billion people on earth. Different though we may be, there are many things we have in common. All of us have been born and all of us will die, unless the end of time should come first. We all eat and sleep and work. We love our families and friends. We experience feelings of joy and sorrow. Of course, there are many other things in which we are alike. However, I wish to emphasize the fact that among those things which are universal is the earnest desire to be happy. We all seek happiness.

To many millions of people, however, happiness seems to be only a word. The word they know, but the achievement of happiness seems beyond them. Many seek it and few find it. It is elusive. We are led to ask, "Is happiness only a word--an impossible dream?" We think not, for we believe that it is a possibility for every man who really wants it.

But perhaps we ought to ask, "What is happiness?" Dr. Maxwell Maltz, in his book, *Five Minutes to Happiness*, asks the same question and then gives this answer: "Happiness is a state of mind or habit where we have pleasant thoughts the greater part of the time. It is a built-in mechanism within us." When I first read this paragraph I paused to remember that there are many people who seem to have everything to make them happy, yet they are not happy. There are others who seem to have few of the ingredients of happiness, yet somehow they are happy. Dr. Maltz continues, "To understand this better it might be well to realize that we also have a built-in worry mechanism. These are not two separate entities like two ears on the face, but they are interlocking processes that work daily in our lives, expressing our emotions, and when we begin to understand who we are, we alone can decide which mechanism we want to use for our purposes, because we can control them. We can make a habit of worrying or of being happy."

An anonymous writer has added, "Happiness and trouble stand at everyone's gate. Yours is the choice which you will invite in." Although this view of happiness is far from complete, I am convinced that there is a great deal to be said for the fact that everyone can be happy if he makes up his mind to do so. More especially, I am convinced that when a person knows the teachings of Christ, he has an understanding of the way to have a happy and meaningful life.

Observations About Happiness

I should like to make six observations concerning happiness. These are not observations which have arisen suddenly, or even recently, but are realizations which have grown upon me through the years. Now, for the first. Happiness is often mistakenly thought to lie in the achieving of much wealth, or great power, or vast knowledge, or unlimited physical, sensual enjoyment. This is not to say that there is no enjoyment in the things that money can buy, for there is. It is not to say that great power and influence may not be heart-warming and gratifying. It is not to say that the accumulation of great knowledge is devoid of any satisfaction and happiness. It is not to say that there are no joys in the realm of the physical senses. What we do say is that if one makes one or another of these areas his chief end in life, he will be disappointed ultimately. There is a legitimate place for each, but it is not the central place in our lives.

No man sought happiness with more inventiveness and more persistence than Solomon. He tried all of these avenues and found them wanting. It is in his book of Ecclesiastes that we find, "I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit; I made me pools of water, to water therefrom the forests where trees were reared; I bought men-servants and maid-servants, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herd and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem; I gathered also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem ... And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy ... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun." (Eccl. 2:1-11).

Observation Number Two

Happiness often is to be found in simple things: a boy and his dog, the pure love of a young man and a woman, a sunrise or sunset, a glass of cool, clear water, a bird's song, a baby's smile. During the New York World's Fair, which ran in 1964-65, the most popular film shown was the film, "To Be Alive." Of all the hundreds of films that were prepared for this fair, this was the one for which the lines of waiting viewers was longest. It was the most talked-about film at the fair. Yet, it had no plot. It was simply the showing of a series of unrelated scenes in the lives of average people. It was simple, yet profound. Typical scenes were: a little Japanese boy rushing breathlessly into a field of golden wheat, with the stalks of grain almost as tall as he; a young African boy rolling a hoop down a jungle trail, looking with wide eyes at the birds and animals of the jungle; a grandfather, his face lined with age, and a grandson, young and eager, sitting in a boat fishing on a quiet pond. These and other scenes had a profound impression upon those who saw them, emphasizing the beauties and the joys of every-day living.

Observation Number Three

Happiness is to be found in doing worthwhile work well. A story has come down through several centuries and still carries a significant message. Sir Christopher Wren was one of the world's most advanced architects and builders. He designed and supervised construction of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. This building was completed in 1710, so the story is an old one. Sir Christopher approached the building site and asked a workman, "What are you doing, my man?" The man answered, "I am laying stones." He went on with his work seeing nothing more than the stones. Wren walked to another part of the huge construction project and asked a second man, "What are you doing, my man?" This time his answer was, "I'm earning a living for my wife and my children." So he was. Still not satisfied, Sir Christopher asked a third man at still a different location, "What are you doing?" This man responded, "I'm building a cathedral." He was laying stones and earning a living as the others were, but he was also doing something more. He realized the ultimate goal of his work. He put himself into his work. He did it well.

Observation Number Four

Happiness and satisfaction are often found in the pursuit of an objective, even more than in its actual attainment. There are many times when there seems to be more real enjoyment as we think about and work for some goal than when the goal itself is actually achieved. There is a joy in working for something that is worthwhile.

Observation Number Five

Happiness is to be found in being more concerned about others than about one's self. All of us know from our own experience and from the observation of others that even though this seems to be upside-down and backward, nevertheless it is true. When we forget ourselves and work for the good of others, we find greater happiness than when we seek our own satisfaction. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever shall be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28). Many years ago when I was still in college a graduation speaker told of an experience which had been immensely rewarding. On one occasion a lady of the church where he was minister baked a chocolate cake and brought it to the church office, saying that she wanted him and his family to have it. He expressed his appreciation and then, since it was mid-morning and not yet time for him to go home for lunch, set the cake on a table in his office beside a window which opened onto a vacant area where neighborhood children often played. During the morning he happened to notice at one point that several of the neighborhood boys, typical children from a not-too-well-to-do neighborhood, had stopped their game and were looking through the window, longingly observing his cake. On an impulse, he invited the boys in, and shared the cake with them. It was soon gone, but there lingered wonderful memories of a happy group of neighborhood children. Months later he told our graduating class that he was still enjoying the cake. A generation later, I am still enjoying a cake which I never saw nor tasted. And now, that I have told this generous-hearted true story to you, people all across this land are enjoying a cake which they never saw nor tasted. How different the destiny of this cake might have been if the preacher had kept it for himself and his family.

Observation Number Six

The ultimate happiness can be found only on the spiritual level. While there is joy and satisfaction in the physical realms of which we have spoken, the highest level of happiness comes in the spiritual realm. The reason is very simple. Basically each of us is a spirit being, more than he is a physical body. We were made in God's image in the sense that each of us is a living soul, destined to exist eternally. This being true, only when there is a right relationship with God can there be real, abiding happiness. All of us know that unhappiness often comes when relationships with others have gone wrong. When there is tension in a family, between husband and wife, or between parents and children, there are deep pains which often cause ulcers and other physical disorders. Similarly, unhappiness comes when there is a wrong relationship with our Creator God. Happiness comes when there is a right relationship with our God.

This is what Augustine meant when he said, "Our mind's are never at rest until they find rest in Thee." A few moments ago we spoke of Solomon's vain explorations in many realms as he sought to find happiness. In the final chapter of his book of Ecclesiastes, at the very close of the chapter, he said, "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." (Eccl. 12:13). Actually, the word duty has been added to that sentence in order to smooth out the translation in English. Literally, there is no word in the Hebrew text to suggest that the word duty should have been included in this sentence. Literally, Solomon said, "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole of Man."

The Bible Says Much

Whereas there is much sorrow and sadness in the world, the Bible says much about joy and happiness. For example, on one occasion, when Jesus had taught his disciples a number of principles of righteous living, he said, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." (John 15:11). Christ guides and instructs that our lives may be full of joy.

After the church began on Pentecost, we read, “And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart.” (Acts 2:46). The early Christians were happy people.

In the conversion story of the Ethiopian nobleman, we find that after he had been taught of Christ and had obeyed his Lord, “He went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:39). On the apostle Paul’s first mission journey, he and his disciples were driven out of the little Asian town of Lystra. Then the scripture says, “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” What unusual circumstances in which to feel joy. But these were suffering for Christ’s sake. Still later, at the end of the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailor, we read, “And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God.” (Acts 16:34).

The writer of Hebrews spoke of Christ in these terms, “Therefore let us also ... look unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:2). Even in his great suffering there was joy because he was providing salvation for all men. To the Philippians Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Phil. 4:4). The apostle Peter speaks of Christians in this manner, “Wherein ye greatly rejoice ... at the revelation of Jesus Christ: whom not having seen ye love; on whom though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.” (I Peter 1:6, 8-9). This is man’s ultimate happiness.

Finally, I would mention the words of Jesus himself. While in the final days of teaching his disciples he spoke about the judgment and how that the righteous would be saved. They would hear these words, he said, “Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter into the joy of thy Lord.” (Matt. 25:21).

Happiness is not just a word. It is a state of mind, a habit of thinking, a way of life. In the deepest sense, ultimately, it is possible only to the Christian. It was G. K. Chesterton who summed it all up, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”