

CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 21, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In recent weeks I have had a growing desire to present a lesson on the subject of "Happiness." Especially have I been concerned to point out the tremendous possibilities of "Christian Happiness." There are many reasons why I have desired to do this. First of all, there is so much tragedy and sorrow in the world. The daily news is often disturbing. In fact, most of the news tells of violent and tragic events. Commonplace happenings, such as the normal, wholesome events of our lives, are not newsworthy. Rather, the news is filled with wars and threats of wars, the danger of man's destruction of his whole universe, storms, accidents, and other happenings of a violent kind. Then, there is crime in all of its different manifestations, showing the general moral degeneracy of our generation. Add to these disturbing elements sickness and death that are common to every home sooner or later and you have the full gamut of tragedy. But there is another side to the picture and that other side balances our disappointments, fears, and anxieties, thus making it possible for us to live reasonably normal happy lives.

Another reason why I have wanted to speak on the possibilities of happiness is that so many people fail to see the marvelous beauties of the world about them. Nature is magnificent. For example, our present season finds the trees on a thousand hills colored in all of their fall splendor. There is no season of the year when there is not something beautiful about us, if we will only take the time to look for it. The grass, the shrubs, and the trees of Middle Tennessee are beautiful beyond the appreciation of most of us. Perhaps we should take a trip into the Middle East in order to appreciate our own homeland more. There is hardly a blade of grass to be seen anywhere. The mountains are simply piles of rock, denuded of their ancient vegetation, left naked to the hot sun. The absence of trees and every other green living thing is appalling. One comes home from seeing such barrenness with a renewed appreciation of a land such as ours.

A Challenging Letter

Then, too, many Christians fail to realize their blessings as members of the kingdom of God. These blessings are to be found both in this life and even more especially in the life that is ahead. Just a few days ago I received a letter from a lady in Indiana which read as follows, "I often listen to your radio broadcast. Will you sometime soon answer this question? Why is it that so few Christians find joy in being Christians? Nearly every day I pray God that he will make his will become my own, so I may find true abundance in life and the real joy of being a Christian. Don't you think ministers and evangelists exaggerate the possibility of joy or peace of mind? Does anyone have peace of mind more than a few seconds at a time? I believe that being a Christian is the only way to live but having the joy that you talk about is few and far between."

Allow me to read to you a passage of scripture that shows the wonderful possibilities of Christian happiness. "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say rejoice." These words were spoken by the apostle Paul, one of the most severely persecuted and yet one of the happiest men who ever lived. This is the beginning of one of the most radiant, most inspiring passages in the Bible and I should like to read to you the remainder of the passage: "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice. Let your forbearance be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Jesus Christ ... I rejoice in the Lord greatly ... for I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound: in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:4-7, 10, 11-13).

Many people have the idea that Christianity is sober, somber, and sad. Actually it is a joyous experience! The passage just read even commands us to rejoice. Christianity not only tells us to rejoice, it teaches us how. According to Webster's Dictionary the word rejoice means "to feel great delight." In other words, it means to be unusually happy, or to have a wonderful, buoyant feeling inside oneself. This is the attitude which Christians should mirror in their lives, in their conversations, and in their faces.

"In the Lord"

It is both interesting and impressive to study the accounts of conversion given in the book of Acts from the viewpoint of the reaction of the convert. Over and over again the story closes by saying that the new Christian rejoiced. The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian nobleman is an excellent example of this. After the evangelist Philip had preached unto him Jesus, he said: "And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:36-39).

Here is a story of a man who came almost a thousand miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, worshipped God according to the Old Testament system, and was on his way back to Ethiopia. Suddenly and unexpectedly the evangelist Philip came to him, preached to him a sermon about Christ, and baptized him, making him a member of the family of God. It is a beautiful sight to see this nobleman whose life was changed as he gave himself to the Lord, returning to the dark continent of Africa with a heart overflowing with joy.

Another example of the joy that came to those who became Christians is found in the story of the Jerusalem church: "And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people." (Acts 2:46-47). This was a great, happy band of people, and they were happy because they were Christians.

The apostles, even though they were severely persecuted, also rejoiced: "They therefore departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." (Acts 5:41). Still another example is that of the Philippian jailor: "And he took them that same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately. And brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly with all his house, having believed in God." (Acts 16:33-34). We would not have expected this Roman jailor to become a Christian. Having become a Christian, this man of pagan, Gentile background could hardly be expected to be emotionally stirred, but the story was different. He was touched by the example of Paul and Silas singing at midnight in the prison; he was moved by the gospel which they preached; and he rejoiced greatly once he had become a child of God. We wish that the inspired record had told us more of this Roman, who no longer belonged to Caesar but to Christ. For we believe that likely he was a pillar of the church at Philippi, a church which long remembered the apostle Paul, both in their prayers and in their gifts.

In discussing the phrase in our text, "in the Lord," I wish to convey the meaning that the spiritual blessings of God are only in Christ. While it is true, that God "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust, (Matt. 5:45.) it is also true that God's spiritual blessings of this world are given both to the evil and the good, to the non-Christian as well as the Christian, but this is not true when it comes to the spiritual blessings. They are only in Christ. This is made crystal clear by the apostle Paul in writing to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ ... having foreordained us into adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will ... in whom we have our redemption through his blood the forgiveness of our trespasses." (Eph. 1:3, 5, 7).

We Rejoice Because

We rejoice because of the certainty of what we are doing. It is a wonderful feeling to know that in becoming a Christian, we have done exactly what is prescribed by the Lord and the apostles in the long ago. If some man should stop us on the street and say, "How do you know you are a Christian?" we would be able to read to him from the New Testament itself, a "thus saith the Lord" for every act that we have done. We would simply "read our title clear" by pointing out the five steps taken by the early disciples in becoming Christians: (1) Hearing the gospel, (2) Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, (3) Repenting of sins, (4) Confessing faith in Christ before men, and (5) Being baptized for the remission of sins.

In the same manner, we would be able to read from the inspired scriptures, "thus saith the Lord" for every act of worship in which we engage. The New Testament presents only five avenues of worshipping the Lord; (1) Singing hymns, (2) Praying, (3) Studying the word of God, (4) Giving of one's means, and (5) Eating the Lord's supper. Each of these we practice in the New Testament manner. Again it is a wonderful feeling to have the certainty of doing just what the blueprint of God prescribes.

The same thing is true of the name which the church wears. It is a name that can be read from the pages of the scriptures. Likewise, the organization of the church is an exact copy of the organization of the original church, described in the Bible. The very doctrines of the church, likewise, are those which you read in the scriptures. Man desires to be certain in buying property and for that reason takes great pains to be sure that his title is clear. How much more concerned man ought to be in the realm of religion to make sure that his title is clear. We rejoice in the certainty of knowing that what we do in religion is what we can read from the inspired book of God.

We believe that this is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote: "The Spirit (meaning the Holy Spirit of God, which manifests itself in the Bible) himself beareth witness with our spirit (our own ability to think and to know), that we are children of God" and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16-17). The Holy Spirit of God speaking through the scriptures, bears witness with our own knowledge, that we have done what God commanded and are therefore members of his family and heirs of heaven.

God's Wonderful Promises

We also rejoice in knowing that the wonderful promises of God are waiting for us. For example, there are those wonderful words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than the food, and the body than the raiment? ... But seek, ye first his kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you." (Matt. 6:25, 33). The physical needs of our bodies and even life itself are matters that we can

leave to the Lord without anguish or worry. The apostle Paul once said, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28). And similarly, "For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (II Cor. 5:1). It is a great reassurance to know that all things work together for good and that when death comes it simply hastens the day when we shall have a heavenly body for eternity. Truly, the promises of God give us cause for rejoicing as Christians. It is a wonderful blessing to be "in the Lord" and to know that these blessings are for us.

"Always"

Pull the word "always" apart and it becomes "all ways". We are to rejoice in the Lord in all ways: physically, for God has promised to take care of us; mentally, for he has told us that we need not be anxious or worry; and spiritually, for he has told us that he will forgive our sins and save our souls in heaven.

Primarily this word "always" applies to time, however, and in that sense it means that not only is the Christian happier than the non-Christian in this life, but that he is also happier throughout the eternity to come. Rejoicing is not for this life only, but for always.

Conclusion

To the Christian, we say, "Remember who you are. You are a child of the King, an heir to heaven. Let nothing ever cause you to be discouraged or down-hearted, remember whose you are and where you are going."

To the man not yet a Christian, we say, "Believe on the Lord, repent of your sins, be baptized for the forgiveness of those sins, so that you, too, can rejoice in the Lord always."