

Happiness, Meaning, and the Lord

M. W. Bassford, 1-20-13

From time to time, we hear stories about preachers who get their sermons off of the Internet. This morning, I have to confess that I got this one off of Facebook, which might leave you expecting a very short sermon! In reality, of course, I exaggerate. What actually happened is that Shane Scott linked to a very thought-provoking article at <http://bit.ly/Xb51RM>, which the author began by asking a very basic question: What do I want out of life?

For most people, this question is a no-brainer. What they want out of life is to be happy. The article, though, suggested that this obvious answer isn't the right answer. She argued that what is most important about our lives is not that they be happy, but that they be meaningful. Even though I'm not at all certain that the author, Emily Esfahani Smith, has so much as set foot inside a church building, much of what she had to say articulated one of the great themes of the Bible—that life is about more than the search for earthly happiness. Let's consider happiness, meaning, and the Lord.

Happiness v. Meaning

Let's begin this morning by looking at the tension between a happiness-seeking life and a meaning-seeking life. One of the verses in the Bible that expresses this tension is the description of **PAUL'S CHOICE** in 1 Corinthians 15:32. When Paul talks about eating and drinking, living it up in the time we have left, he's talking about the search for happiness. Interestingly enough, Esfahani Smith talked about happiness in strikingly similar terms. According to her, we seek happiness when we seek the same things that animals seek to make themselves happy. We look for food, we look for sex, we look for environments that provide us with ease and the absence of stress. That's earthly happiness.

However, that pursuit of earthly happiness is not what Paul chose to pursue. He didn't spend his days eating and drinking. Instead, he chose a course of life that led him to fight against wild beasts in the gladiatorial arena at Ephesus. Now, the Kody Troyners of the world might think it's pretty cool to have the chance to fight a lion in hand-to-paw combat, but for most of us, fighting for our lives is not what would make us happy. Nor was it what made Paul happy. He chose to live in a way that would force him to risk his life because he wanted to attain to the resurrection from the dead. That's not the search for happiness. That's the search for something that will make life meaningful.

The Scripture also presents the difference between happiness and meaning in its discussion of **FLESH AND SPIRIT**. Look at Paul's words in Romans 8:5. These are the two ways we can live. We can live with a mind set on the flesh, concerned only with what will make us happy, or we can live with a mind set on the spirit, concerned with what will make our lives spiritually meaningful. Sometimes, the call of the flesh and the call of the spirit aren't in conflict. For example, when I got up this morning, I was hungry, so I ate breakfast. The fullness of my tummy made me happy, and it didn't displease God either. Indeed, I would argue that because of my issues with hypoglycemia and low blood sugar, it was spiritually necessary for me to eat if I wanted to preach the gospel effectively.

However, what if I'm in the bakery section of Jewel, and I get hungry, and the urge takes me to eat a donut right there in the bakery section and leave without paying for it? A dog wouldn't have any problem with that, and my flesh doesn't have any problem with that either. My tummy is just as full whether I have a receipt or not. Stealing the donut would make me happy. The part of me that has a problem with donut theft is my spirit, which knows that it's wrong and displeasing to God to take something that doesn't belong to me. If I exit the store with my stomach still growling, I am not as happy in fleshly terms as I would have been if I'd eaten the donut. However, I have made a meaningful choice.

By contrast, we see where the search for happiness will take us in Paul's list of **THE WORKS OF THE FLESH**. Let's look at it in Galatians 5:19-21. This is an ugly list, but let's be honest about what we see on it. Everything on this list is the product of somebody's search for happiness. I'm unhappy in my marriage, so I'm going to cheat on my spouse. I don't like what my brother says in Bible class, so I'm going to pick a fight with him to blow off steam. My brother still won't shut up, so I'm going to kill him to shut him up and get some peace. And so on. Indeed, every sin that people commit, they commit because they think the sin will make them happy. They don't care that the sin will hurt somebody else. They don't care that their sin offends God. They want to be happy, so they sin to make themselves happy. The essence of sin is selfishness, and so is the essence of the pursuit of happiness at all costs.

The problem is, though, that the pursuit of happiness never makes anybody happy. Instead, it leads only to **VANITY**. Consider Solomon's commentary on this in Ecclesiastes 2:10-11. Solomon pursued happiness through every avenue available to man, and when he had finished his pursuits, he had to acknowledge that his search was a failure.

Similarly, one of the parts of the Esfahani Smith article that made me smile was her triumphant rediscovery, 3000 years later, of exactly the same conclusion. She began by discussing the modern American fascination with happiness. We live in a land of material wealth and ease, our bookstores are stocked with books that tell us how to be happy, we can even hire happiness gurus who can give us one-on-one instruction, but none of it works. Recent scientific studies have shown that of people who have made the pursuit of happiness their life goal, they are able to construct for themselves lives filled with material pleasure and ease, but those selfish lives don't bring them lasting satisfaction. Instead of being

happy, their pursuit of pleasure leaves them feeling purposeless and adrift. What's more, when some kind of adversity or suffering arises, they crumble, because without happiness, they have lost their reason for living. That's all very profound and very true, but the author could have skipped all the philosophy and sociological research and just read Ecclesiastes! If we live lives that are about nothing more than the pursuit of happiness, those lives will be a vain and futile exercise.

Nor does that even take into account the effect that the pursuit of happiness has on **PLEASING GOD**. Paul explains in Romans 8:6-8. If our highest priority is pleasing ourselves, that makes it logically impossible for us to please God. After all, the law of God tells us over and over again, "Here is something that you might want to do, but this is what you ought to do instead." When all we care about is being happy, we listen to what God says, and we say to Him, "I know this is what you want me to do, God, but I don't care, because my happiness is more important than Your will." We separate ourselves from God, both now and forever, because we don't leave any room in our lives for Him. Happiness is such a facially appealing goal. Who doesn't want to be happy? However, if happiness is truly our goal, our search for happiness will lead us to hurt others and hurt God, it will bring us to a life of aimlessness and discontent, and worst of all, it will result in death, the death of an eternity spent apart from the God whose will was none of our concern.

Jesus and Meaning

Now that we've set out the general theory, let's look at a specific example. Let's look at the life of our Lord, and the emphasis that He put on meaning instead of happiness. One of the things that Jesus' search for the meaningful life led Him to was **HOMELESSNESS**. Jesus Himself explains in Luke 9:57-58. As far as I know, everybody here this morning has a home, and having that home is something that we often take for granted, but let me tell you, having somewhere that belongs to us that we can sleep is really important! Shortly after Lauren and I got married, we evacuated Beaumont in the face of Hurricane Rita, and the storm damaged the town so badly that we weren't allowed back into the city, and likewise back into our apartment, for two weeks. During that time, we went here, there, and everywhere: Lauren's parents' house in Houston, my parents' house in Missouri, and a hotel in Dallas, but we couldn't go home. It was a really strange, unsettling feeling, because I so missed the security of having somewhere that was mine.

When we first meet the adult Jesus in the gospels, Jesus has a home. It's located in Capernaum. By Luke 9, though, Jesus is homeless. In between, we don't know what happened to Jesus' house. Maybe He sold it for money to support His work. Maybe someone stole it. Maybe it burned down. Regardless, Jesus lost it, and with it, He lost the security that comes from having a home. We know that Jesus thought this was a problem because He presented it to a would-be disciple as a problem. Jesus didn't enjoy being homeless, but it was more important to Him to preach.

Likewise, Jesus emphasized meaning over happiness in His willingness to say things that made **ENEMIES**. We see a thumbnail sketch of these enemies in Luke 11:53-54. This passage presents one of the most consistent aspects of Jesus' ministry: the ferocious opposition of the scribes and Pharisees. However, the Pharisees didn't create this conflict. Jesus did. If Jesus had been content to take the Pharisees' claims to righteousness at face value, observe their traditions, and compliment them now and again, He could have avoided conflict with them altogether. He could have had a nice, quiet life teaching His disciples. He could have lived to a ripe old age, if only He'd been willing to go along to get along.

However, that kind of quiet acquiescence to the overbearing hypocrisy of the Pharisees wasn't what Jesus came to earth to do. He saw the evil that they stood for, and He attacked it, loudly and publicly. He rejected their traditions when those traditions weren't in line with the word of God. Instead of complimenting them, He called them vipers and whitewashed tombs. Voila! Instant enemies! The Pharisees made Jesus' life miserable until the day He died, but Jesus chose to invite their hostility and attacks by speaking the truth, instead of making friends by concealing it.

In His life, Jesus also chose paths that led Him to **HUMILIATION**. This is most conspicuous during His trial, as reported in Luke 22:63-65. All of us have endured humiliating experiences in our lives. Unless we're very strange, they don't add much to our happiness, nor did they add much to the happiness of Jesus. However, where we go out of our way to avoid potential humiliation, which is why you won't ever catch me on a skateboard, Jesus sought out a situation in which He knew He would be humiliated. He didn't merely suspect. He knew. He wasn't on trial because the Jewish leaders snuck up on Him while He was napping. He was on trial because He deliberately came back to Jerusalem when He knew His enemies had already decided to kill Him, and because He went to the garden of Gethsemane when He knew Judas would take the mob there to betray Him. Jesus was either a fool, or not interested in seeking His own happiness.

Finally, of course, the last area in which Jesus chose meaning over happiness was in His **DEATH**. The moment of that death is captured by Mark 15:37. Last week, I was involved in an online discussion which wandered into, among other things, a discussion of the cruelty of crucifixion. 2000 years ago, crucifixion was the ultimate expression of contempt. You crucified somebody when you decided that he needed to be dead, he needed to suffer a long time before dying, and you didn't want to bother with inflicting the suffering yourself. Crucifixion was torture by autopilot.

And yet, Jesus was crucified because that's where He chose to end up. He deliberately made the decisions that would lead to Him experiencing His own flesh being tortured by autopilot. It's trite to speak of Jesus' agony on the cross, but it's true. There aren't a whole lot of pretty ways to die, but crucifixion is an ugly way to die. Jesus expired only at the

end of several hours of intense suffering, the kind that would wring cries of agony from even the strongest of men. It's horrible to think of men doing such things to one another, but awe-inspiring to think of Jesus choosing it for Himself.

This, then, is the outline of Jesus' life: poverty and homelessness, constant attacks by enemies, humiliation, and an early, brutal death. It is impossible to say that Jesus lived a life of earthly happiness. If happiness is the goal of human existence, then the life of Christ was an abject failure. Clearly, Jesus wasn't interested in happiness. Instead, He pursued **MEANING**. He explains Himself in John 15:13-14. To Jesus, His own life wasn't important. It was the lives of others that were important, and He made His life meaningful by living and dying for them. In fact, to speak of the life of Jesus as merely meaningful is to sell it dramatically short. By His sacrifice and His example, Jesus did nothing less than change the nature of human existence. He suffered greatly, and yet no life will ever mean as much as His did.

In a moment, we're about to partake of the Lord's Supper. As we do, let's reflect on two main things. First, let's remember Jesus' resolute pursuit of meaning over happiness. He could have been selfish. He could have pursued short-term happiness and left the human race hanging. However, He chose to live a meaningful life instead, sacrificing the pursuit of pleasure and even His own life, dying so that eternal life could be ours. For that, we must always honor Him.

Second, let's contemplate our own lives. We've all signed on as disciples of Jesus. As part of that profession of faith, we have also confessed that we believe that our own happiness is not what is most important. We have pledged ourselves to a Master who abandoned every opportunity for short-term pleasure in search of an enduring good. Is that the way that we live, with nobility, purpose, and meaning, or do we live like clever animals, with no higher purpose than seeking out what makes us feel good? Let's consider these things as we share in our Lord's memorial feast.

Meaning for Us

As we've seen, we must seek out meaningful lives. Only that kind of life can offer us satisfaction both here and in the hereafter, and as followers of Jesus, it's the kind of life to which we have pledged ourselves anyway. In the final portion of our lesson this morning, then, we're going to consider ways that we can make our lives meaningful.

The first of these is to **CRUCIFY THE SELF**. Paul famously raises this subject in Galatians 2:20. This means that we must take the part of us that aspires only to be happy, the clever animal within that only cares about feeling good, and nail it to the cross like the Roman guard crucified Jesus. When we have done away with the flesh, all that will remain will be a life with the dignity and the grandeur of the life of Christ. Yes, we will absolutely forfeit a lot of opportunities for short-term pleasure if we choose to live this way, but we will be rewarded with a life of ultimate meaning.

Here's an application: to my right is the attendance board. It reports both Sunday and Wednesday night attendance. By using my epic math skills, when I look at this board, I quickly conclude that there are several dozen people who attend on Sundays but not on Wednesdays. Some have to work, but most choose not to be here.

Let me be honest. My own clever animal, who is incompletely crucified at best, sympathizes with that. On Wednesday nights, when we get home from work, and we're worn out, and we don't want to do anything but spend all evening in front of the TV with a bowl of popcorn and a can of Diet Coke, it's hard to go to services, and it's easy to stay home. It's pleasant to plop down in the recliner and not budge. It's pleasant, but it's not meaningful. It provides short-term freedom from stress, but it doesn't enrich our lives through study of God's word and association with His people. Only making the hard decision can we make our Wednesday nights a meaningful step toward a meaningful existence.

Similarly, we find meaning as we **ENDURE TRIAL**. James makes this point in James 1:2-4. The times of suffering in our lives are the times when the difference between seeking happiness and seeking meaning really becomes apparent. For the one who desires only to be happy, happiness has become his god. When he encounters suffering that keeps him from being happy, the suffering kills his god, and he becomes godless. It destroys him.

By contrast, when we commit our lives to the Lord, our quest to live spiritually meaningful lives sustains us through suffering. The devil can take every earthly joy from our lives, including life itself, but he cannot keep us from glorifying God. When we choose to glorify God, when we follow Him without wavering even in times of intense suffering, that is when we bring Christ most perfectly to life within us. We don't regard Jesus with awe when He is eating a quiet meal with His disciples, but when we consider His anguish in the garden, as we see Him stand silently before His accusers, when we regard the spectacle of the Creator allowing His creation to nail His hands to the cross, that is when the majesty of Christ drives us to our knees. When we suffer in His image, we reveal that majesty to others.

We also find meaning when we **GIVE**. Let's listen to Jesus in Luke 6:38. This is a passage that the prosperity-gospel folks love to abuse. They quote this and want us to believe that if we send them a check, God will send us a larger one. The reality is different. As it is true that the mind set on the flesh is selfish, so too is it true that the mind set on the spirit is selfless, and when we choose to be selfless, we will be repaid in the coin that matters to us. When we take our only free afternoon this week and use it to visit shut-ins, we receive our reward in the smile of the brethren whom we do see and in the smile of the Father whom we do not see, and the satisfaction it brings us will endure and not pass away. Sure, it was the hard choice to make, sure, the clever-animal part of us would have had more fun taking a nap, but a week from now, the effects of the nap are gone, and we want another one. The expression of love, though, lasts forever.

Fourth, if we want to live meaningful lives, we must learn to **WAIT**. Paul tells us why in Philippians 2:20. The one who seeks only happiness is also a seeker of instant gratification. He wants what he wants, and he wants it now. By contrast, though, meaning often takes time to emerge, and we have to learn to wait for it. There is meaning in waiting until marriage. There is meaning in waiting for the answer to prayer. There is meaning in waiting to learn the reason for our suffering, if indeed we learn that reason at all in this life. Most of all, there is meaning in waiting for the Lord.

Back when I was in junior high, I rode the bus to school. We had a long driveway, and my parents would not tolerate the thought of me waddling out to the bus while the bus driver honked, so I waited at the top of the driveway, even in winter. Some mornings, it was cold enough that my hair froze, and let me tell you, on mornings like that, I awaited the arrival of the bus with great joy and expectation! That's the way that Christians should wait for the return of Jesus. This life is fatally flawed, but Jesus is perfect, and we have no other hope besides waiting for Him.

Finally, we complete the meaning of our existence when we **CONQUER**. Consider the proclamation of Revelation 12:10-11. In context, this passage appears to refer to the overthrow of the devil when Jesus died for our sins, but it also prefigures the triumph of His saints. Why will the saints conquer in that day? Because they did not love their lives, even unto death. Because instead of choosing to live lives that were pleasant, they chose to live lives that mattered. Just as Jesus overcame, we too can overcome through Him if we resolve to walk in His footsteps. If all we want is to be happy, the pursuit of happiness will leave us with nothing. The pursuit of meaning, though, will leave us with everything.