

PSALM 128

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it shall go well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

The Lord bless you from Zion,. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

HAPPINESS IS...

Psalms 128

John Lennon told the story about being a small boy and his mother teaching him that the secret of life was happiness. Then one day, his teacher asked the class to complete an assignment on the purpose of life. Lennon's response to the assignment was that the purpose of life was to be happy. The teacher told him he did not understand the assignment, and Lennon told her she did not understand life.

There are at least two major questions here. The first is how we define the purpose of our lives and the second is the nature of happiness itself. What is it? Where does it come from? And how important is it in discovering your purpose? Are the two joined at the hip?

These are basically spiritual questions in disguise. And I really do think we often struggle with them. Because historically, Christianity has had scant regard for the happiness of her devotees. In the early years, suffering was more prominently on display as many martyrs went to their gruesome deaths. Happiness was not relevant.

From our modern perspective, however, happiness is not only relevant, it is prized. And it is most frequently associated with having fun. And truth be known, nobody was having much fun two millennia ago. Life was grim for the vast majority of people; only members of royal and

wealthy families possessed an advantage in having fun.

So for most early Christians the emphasis was upon salvation and the next life. Naturally, then, their goal was to achieve a ticket to heaven and because of all the discrimination they were enduring, the common belief became that God rewarded those who suffered. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering.*

Needless to say, happiness was a foreign concept. And that attitude remained a staple of Christian theology for centuries to come; really until recently. I recall one of my seminary professors offering us a definition of a Puritan as “someone who is deathly afraid that somewhere, somehow, someone is having fun.”

But that was then and now is now. Standards of living have vastly improved for much of the world's people which has led to an overhaul of what we can expect from our lives. We demand a lot more than the basics of food, clothing and shelter. And not coincidentally, it has altered our notions of life's purpose. Suffering to punch a ticket to heaven? No. That is a poor selling point; who is going to buy it? Rather, in our current culture, happiness, as Lennon noted, *is* the purpose in living. Indeed, people hire life coaches to help them discover what it is that makes them happy. And then they work together to develop strategies to find it. And not surprisingly, for most people, it involves having fun.

The ancient Hebrews had a much healthier attitude about happiness. There were, of course, the endured many decades of suffering over numerous centuries (continuing today) with frequent wars and internal political struggles, the Babylonian captivity etc. But there were also

prolonged periods of prosperity which were regarded as a reward from God for their obedience.

So not only did God not disparage happiness, God desired it for his chosen people.

Listen once more to our psalm: *Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it shall go well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.*

Does this sound like a God who places a premium on suffering? Rather, it speaks of a God who values human happiness and wants to bestow it upon the faithful. And this takes us back to our original question. Are happiness and our self-defined purpose in life connected? The answer, of course, is yes. But what makes this difficult is that the circumstances of our lives can dramatically change our purpose. How has the pandemic altered how you directed your life? Illness can stomp on our previously defined purpose and force us into a period of re-evaluation. Stuff just happens. Purpose is an ever evolving fact of life and how you manage it will determine your future happiness. You have to actually think about it and pray about it.

God will help—Paul reminds us that God is the Great Consoler. But God needs help from you. Several weeks ago, we decided to go to a new fast food restaurant which features a healthy Asian based cuisine. It is called a “fusion bowl.” A server will walk you through all of your options and present you with your order in minutes. But she will not make decisions for you—you must tell her what you want.

In other words, you have to identify what makes you happy. Is it fun? Is it relationships? Is it doing your life’s work or your hobby? There are no wrong answers. And if you perceive it as a spiritual task, then you must declare it and pursue it. You cannot leave God guessing what doors to open for you. As one writer said, “God is happy, and if we wish to draw happiness into our experience, we must first unify ourselves with the happiness and the joy that God is.”

When we find happiness, then our purpose becomes to share it. We are in community

with others. Happiness is contagious—as is misery. The more people who are happy, the more our own happiness is enhanced. There is a Chinese proverb that goes: “The only way to multiply happiness on earth is to divide it.”

So ask yourself: for you: Happiness is...?

Reverend Thomas Dunlap August 8, 2021