

# Happiness

By Paul Penner

## **In pursuit of happiness!**

Spring is a time for new life. How it invigorates me to step outside and see life being forced out of the ground in sprouts of green! The warm air and smells of earth punctuated with birds chirping and kids playing on the streets. It calls the heart to wake up. Come alive! I love it. Greenness is wonderful – it is the color of life and everywhere it bursts forth soon to be followed by flowers and blossoms in every color. Thank you God ...for making spring a reminder of another kind of life experienced following dark winters in the soul. Glimmers of hope now will someday bud into a resurrection from death until everything is swallowed up by life just like darkness is swallowed up by light. It's going to happen as sure as the first Easter. Spring is a symbol of hope for everyone and everything that groans for life.

Proverbs 13:12b (NASB) says, “desire fulfilled is a tree of life”. This implies that how life cooperates with our desires will be felt emotionally. If life cooperates, then we feel positive emotions – ie. that's what being happy is. If life doesn't cooperate, we feel negative emotions – ie. unhappy. Is this what we make life to be all about – cooperating with our desires? It's what children chase after. Are we any different? As adults we have just graduated to different desires. Is this the fruit from the tree of life that everyone pursues? I think so. People just have different desires that they elevate in priority to number #1 status, but it is desire satisfied, nonetheless, that we pursue.

So should we flock to the 'tree of life', chasing after random bits of happiness – or is it still being guarded by two angels wielding swords? Does the pursuit of personal happiness have limitations? Does anything exist above the pursuit of personal happiness? Or is happiness supreme, and therefore we should do whatever we have to, in order to find it? Sell off our possessions and abandon unhappy circumstances, do whatever, no matter the cost – but find happiness? In this manner the Bible says we are to search for wisdom – but concerning happiness it says that we are better off in a house of mourning than in a house of mirth (laughter). Why would this be?

As I pondered the apparent contradiction here, I considered that positive emotions can be the result of life cooperating with good *or* bad goals. Happiness doesn't discriminate between foolish pursuits or healthy ones. A lottery winner can feel happy emotions. To the seekers of lottery fortunes spending 10% of their income on the chance of someday winning *BIG* feels justified. Is that foolish or wise? I think it is foolish because there is a 90% plus chance that I would lose on that investment. Why wouldn't I invest where there is a reasonable basis for anticipating a return on my investment? Better that I give my money away, without anticipation of reward in this life. At least there will be reward in the next.

I have come to believe that there is such a thing as meaningless pleasure and meaningless pain. When pleasure or pain is experienced outside of covenant relationship they are meaningless. Everything must be measured against what matters in the long run and that will always be against its effect on relationship. I am more vulnerable to error when I am absorbed by the pursuit of meaningless pleasure than when I am subjected to meaningless pain. Christians in communist Russia had their values refined during times of persecution. We in our western world, with its culture of affluence, are more vulnerable to blindness about what matters (ie. our eternal needs) when we are busy indulging our temporal desires. This is not easily shared by those suffering persecution.

Since we are not in control over all of life's circumstances we can't guarantee happiness in every situation – then how are we to be wise in the management of our desires so as to end up at least content with the cup we are left to drink? I believe that wisdom, (which is also referred to as a 'tree of life' to those who find her), has some insights for us.

If in our mind we divide desires into three categories reflecting... purely temporal desires (ie. physical ones), purely eternal desires (ie. also called spiritual ones) and lastly relationship desires (a category which overlaps the temporal and the eternal in this life), we have a good grid within which to evaluate one desire against another in terms of their overall value. It makes so much sense not to pursue temporal desires if and when this pursuit compromises eternal desires. Temporal desires have value for this life only – for example, clothes, houses, possessions, food and beverages, sexual fulfillment, etc. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy desires that were meant for this life in their place, but never in a way which compromises desires that have eternal value (ie. like companionship, justice, compassion, relationships, acceptance, charity, etc.).

Enduring happiness enjoys the good things of this life, but in a way that does not compromise those desires which have eternal value. Happiness that cannot be lost is actually joy. An example of joy is when our children make decisions based on integrity, or choose wisdom over foolishness even though it costs them. This makes us proud of them. Who could steal away our joy when we see character being chosen above convenience, relief or passing pleasure by those we love? Be content to aim for the best of happiness in both worlds, this one and the next – a happiness that leaves one without regret is true happiness. There's more to be said and I'll follow this theme up next Communique. Have a good summer!

### **More on 'happiness'...**

*H*appiness gives us energy. "A merry heart is like medicine to the bones" (Proverbs). Small wonder that desire satisfied would be referred to as a 'tree of life'. If we could be happy all the time it would be heaven.

In the last Communique I ventured to say that there was more to say about happiness. (I felt pretty safe with that comment). Come to think of it – after I have said everything I have to

say about happiness, you could add what you have to say and we still wouldn't have had the last words. But hopefully something worthwhile can be accomplished by expressing some additional thoughts.

I made mention of meaningful pleasure and meaningless pleasure, and meaningful pain and meaningless pain. Really our choice in life isn't so much between pleasure and pain, which are often the options we want, but rather between meaningfulness or meaninglessness. If we consider accurately the present and the future when making decisions, there should be a lot less meaningless pleasure or pain that we will experience in life. If you want to be happy (or rather happier) – be smart and don't be stupid (a paraphrase of what Proverbs is saying over and over), think ahead about your choices. When you choose behaviors or pursuits you are also choosing the consequences that accompany those choices. Don't make choices that promise consequences that you don't want to reap. What we sow we will reap. Take thought about the short and long term effects that accompany your choices.

It is important to sow what will yield good things. There are many areas of stewardship in which we can sow wise choices. When we do, the chances of reaping a harvest of good things will increase our celebration and enjoyment in life. For example, we are stewards of... time, our bodies, knowledge, relationships, our word, our environment, spiritual and material resources, suffering and of freedom/opportunities. Being a wise steward, which each of these areas of stewardship affords, will have a different result than taking things for granted and sowing whatever.

Jesus said, "Blessed is the man who is persecuted for being my follower. Be happy about it, be very glad!" (*Because you have just won heaven's lottery?*). "For a great reward awaits you in heaven." Matthew 5:11 & 12.

When we experience pain and cruel treatment associated with following Christ's pattern for living (being a good steward in life), we can anticipate happiness down the road while experiencing **meaningful** pain and pleasure in the present. Temporary desires for peace and worry-free living might be sacrificed because we care, but the rewards in this life and the next will far outweigh the pain.

This so contradicts the 'me first' attitude and 'only if it doesn't cost too much' mentality of our worldly culture. These two approaches to life are in contrast. Love me first vs. love you no matter what. Under the earthly wisdom of the old nature we follow the dictates of love me first. But, if we want to enjoy life to its full potential, be faithful where others depend on you, and love others well – even when they fail to love you. That is the greatest thing one can do in life – and therefore it's probably the hardest. But love is the most rewarded (really the only act rewarded) and it is the most like Jesus!