

Searched by the Psalms

The Nature of Christian Happiness

**Ps 111 & 112, Luke 14:1 & 7-14
(Hymns – 333, 624, 706, 775)**

God wants us to be happy.
That is my conviction.
In Jesus Christ, through the effective work of the Holy Spirit,
God offers a salvation
that brings true happiness to human beings.
In relationship with Jesus Christ,
we live well, we flourish,
we live as God created us to live,
full of grace and truth.

There are a lot of obstacles
to such flourishing in the faith
in our lives,
but the goal, the purpose, the meaning of life,
is found in the rich abundance of thriving as God intends.

Even our ancestors in the Reformed faith
knew this to be case,
though we must admit that they did not always practice it faithfully.
The first question in the Shorter Catechism,
that porridge of Christian education upon which some of us were raised,
asks, “What is humanity’s chief end?”
The answer is
“Humanity’s chief end is to enjoy God and serve him forever.”
That’s an invitation to be happy,
to flourish and thrive, to live abundantly,
in relationship with Jesus Christ.

This theme is found throughout the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures –
Job, many of the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.
It’s taken up over and over again
in the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and the apostles.
At its heart, wisdom literature in the Scriptures
Provides practical advice on the attitudes and behaviours
that constitute a faithful life of flourishing
in relationship to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Psalms 111 and 112 are two of the wisdom Psalms.
They really do belong together
and were probably read in worship together, as one Psalm,
like we did this morning.

Psalm 111 describes the source of our happiness,
while Psalm 112 describes the expression of our happiness.

The source of our happiness, according to Psalm 111,
lies in the things that God does –
his kindness and mercy,
his constant provision of our needs,
his steadfast faithfulness to the covenant
("I will be your God and you will be my people" –
note the order – God promises first and we respond)
his gift of a land,
his faithfulness and justice,
his acts in setting his people free to be an example of blessing.

And the way to become wise,
to be happy in relationship to God,
is to honour and obey,
not out of duty because you are coerced to do it,
but out of joy because you deeply want to do it.
This is an obedience of gratitude and thanksgiving.

That's what Psalm 112 describes so eloquently,
this joy of grateful obedience.
Blessing, wealth, and prosperity are promised to God's faithful.
Those who are merciful, kind, and just
will be lights in a dark world.
Those who are generous and honest in business
will succeed and be remembered fondly.
Bad news will not make them worried or afraid,
but will be taken in stride because of their trust in God.
They will care for the needy.
They will be powerful and respected.
Such a flourishing, happy life will be the envy of all
and a witness to the greatness of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

Our gratitude and thanksgiving
for the marvellous gift of God's covenant love
is expressed in living the life modeled by Jesus Christ.
We are to be a blessing to all we encounter
in every dimension of our lives.
True Christian happiness is found in living a Christ-like life.

But what specific qualities of personal character and behaviour
lead to this kind of happiness?
No better list can be found than the one in Paul's letter to the Galatians
that I keep repeating over and over again.

Paul begins this chapter in his letter to the Galatians
with a resounding affirmation that Christ has set us free
to be God's people.

We are free to witness to the happiness and blessings
to be found in relationship with Jesus Christ.
We are free to model that happiness in everything we do.
By God's grace through the gifts of God's Holy Spirit,
we live *in* Jesus Christ.

That life is characterized by
love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, humility, and self-discipline.
To live these values and bless others through them
is to find happiness in Jesus Christ.

What often keeps us from living these values is fear –
fear of failure, fear for our safety, fear of embarrassment,
fear of those who think and act differently,
fear of dying.

But in Jesus Christ we see most clearly
how the love of God casts out fear,
how the love of God frees us to live courageous lives that bless
God, others, and ourselves.

Next year, beginning in January 2011,
I've decided to preach and craft our worship services
around the parables of Jesus.
We will allow the Holy Spirit to provoke us with the parables.
Each week we will explore together one of the stories
that Jesus used to help his disciples and us
lead lives of blessing and happiness.

But if others are going to believe Jesus' message,
they will have to see it believed and practiced
by those who profess to be Christians.
We have a history of giving in to the obstacles and barriers
to this kind of flourishing and happiness far too often.
We know we are forgiven and freed to flourish,
but we must strive to live that reality in all that we do
so it may be seen by others as being genuine and trustworthy.

These others may be our children, our grandchildren,
our neighbours, our colleagues at work,
people who have moved into this community that we don't yet know.

As that wonderful hymn says,
"They will know we are Christians by our love."
I was intrigued to discover that the author of that hymn, Peter Scholtes,
was a prominent researcher and consultant
in the fields of teamwork and leadership,
one of my other passions and professions.
Happiness in the work we do together,
be in our families, our churches, or our workplaces,
is grounded in God's love for us and our grateful responses.

And as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians,
*Love that originates in God is patient and kind
never boasts, is not full of pride
always hopes, always trusts.*
It is the most powerful evidence of Christ in us.

And as Jesus himself encourages his disciples in John's Gospel,
Obey my commandment to love so that your joy and happiness may be full.

So, that's the nature of Christian happiness in a nutshell –
love God, love others, and love yourself.

The continuing challenge is to make it happen.

Written and preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church
Burnaby, BC
www.brentwoodpc.ca

August 29, 2010