

Personal Happiness and the Bible

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Before I became a Christian, my refuge was song writing. As my personal circumstances became more intense, my “**Songs Notebook**” still had lyrics and ideas, but it became more like ... a diary. It was active into my early Christian months. Years later, leafing through it, I found references to a feeling that plagued me as I awoke to my pre-Christian day. It was a feeling of dread - a deep dread. It was a mixture of frustration, purposelessness, fear and hopelessness. It was sickening. I called it, “*that rock gut feeling.*”

Recently, a reader asked me to consider writing an article, “**Personal Happiness and the Bible.**” That caused great pause and reflection. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines happiness as: “*1. favored by circumstances: lucky: fortunate 2. having, showing or causing a feeling of pleasure, joy, etc.*” While such definitions may capture the meaning of happiness, the elements giving rise to such a state are what **really** matter - and the point of the forthcoming material. Some of the perspective I will bring may sound a bit cliché, but some of my supportive thoughts may surprise you. So, here goes.

The Bible

Now how cliché is that? But, after 30 plus years, I have never opened the Bible, and then closed it saying, “*Gosh, I just wasted my time. I wish I would have done something else.*” It gives rise to “*joy inexpressible*” (1Pet 1:8), and regularly reveals how “*fortunate*” I now am in Jesus Christ, how “*favored,*” and how this Book is itself fortune unmatched. He declares, “*every word of God is tested*” (Pr 30:5). Part of what that means is that the rigors, traumas and complaints of life can be thrust up against it ... and it stands - as guide, instructor, and final authority. It does not shrink, wither or retreat from any challenge, or challenger, of this age. “*State your cause, that you may be proved right*” (Isa 43:26). I have never found any subject to be off limits, so when needed, or desired, I state my cause - as I see it - before Him. The result? Well, you already know what I am going to say. It is obvious I have concluded that the Bible is a document of ...

Superior Thoughts

Recently, an article directory turned down one of my submitted articles because it “*did not contain enough original content.*” As I inquired about this, I discovered the problem. I had quoted too much Bible. This made me very happy. The reason? Without even consciously realizing it, such a “*problem*” demonstrates I have internally concluded that the thoughts in the Bible are superior to my own.

Of course, others, who have closely examined the Bible’s assertions, have concluded otherwise. I often cite Thomas Paine’s works, “**Age of Reason: 1**” and “**Age of Reason: 2**” as examples. He understood the Bible’s position on many subjects better than many occupants of the pulpit. Yet he, and many like him, have determined **their thoughts** are superior to the Bible. I do not consider myself more contemplative or intellectual than many of these individuals. Nor do I believe I am innately morally superior. In fact, I have often found much honesty in their reasons for rejecting Bible thoughts. The difference between us ... is that the Bible’s Author decided to enter my realm, and open my mind “*to understand the scriptures*” (Lk 24:45). And though such adversaries are in a very dangerous posture with the Bible’s Author, it is quite possible they were (will be) similarly graced sometime before their exit. I know He is willing,

and even delights - in surprising people. That's not to say I would be thus inclined. For example, I would have never ... healed Malchus' ear (Jn 18:1-11 and Lk 22:51). I still wouldn't. I am glad God is not like me. You see, His thoughts inform His actions - and reactions - and **all** are superior ... to mine.

God's descent to my level is an undeserved act that has made the Bible a vehicle granting access into the internals of our Creator. His challenging, superlative material is the bedrock for my personal happiness. It not only addresses the specifics of my current situations, but also raises my mind and heart above this reality. Now, a few specifics.

No Competition

... with others. *"For we are not bold to class ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding"* (2Cor 10:12). The first place we are relieved from competition involves salvation. We cannot be, and are not expected to be, in competition with Jesus' work on our behalf. The righteousness of Christ and the blood of Christ are offered ... as gifts. These "*stand-alone*" gifts are the only "**things**" that can secure right standing with God. He knows it is impossible to add to Jesus' righteousness (He achieved a life here of 100% obedience), and He also knows we cannot expunge our own sins. We are to simply accept these gifts.

Once this is settled, then comes our life's challenge. To be placed in competition with others ... is too small a goal. God has a much stiffer challenge in store. Our competition is to live up to His expectations **for our own self**. He alone determines those expectations for each individual ... and there is no intersection with anyone else's challenge. When Peter did not like the glimpse Jesus gave him of his own future, he quickly pointed to John saying, *"Lord, what about this man?"* Jesus' reply? *"If I want him to remain until I come (His return) what is that to you? You follow Me!"* (Jn 21:18-22).

We are not to compete with Jesus and we are not in competition with others.

This understanding profoundly affects everything. For example, I can now rejoice in the success of others - and promote **their** work - *even if laboring in the same field!* Each Christian has been *"created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand, that (he/she) should walk in them"* (Eph 2:10). It is impossible for any outsider to infringe on this act of God - thus making one's own life, opportunities, or influence smaller. Each Christian can give 100% effort 100% of the time - and never threaten another's turf ... or be threatened by the 100% effort of another. Envy and jealousy are needless wastes. How can such an understanding ... not create personal happiness?

Thus, the attainment of personal happiness is placed in the one solitary place in the universe I can regularly affect ... my own hands. This is astoundingly liberating. God will measure me by my use (or neglect) of personal talents, performance in granted opportunities, and actions/reactions in the situations of my unique life experience. While I am often quite unhappy with my performance, that does not finally sully the personal happiness derived from such a life framework. It just means I must repent, get back up ... and step up.

And this verse in Ephesians 2:10 (quoted above) makes it clear ...

God Has a Plan

... for my life. Now that really does sound cliché. But, one element of my “rock gut feeling” was a vast purposelessness. I summed it up this way. “So what if I commit to some profession? If I’m lucky it will last ... maybe 50 years tops? Then what? What’s the !*^0%* point?” To limit Ephesians 2:10 (last paragraph) to this life span ... is a gross misunderstanding of what the Father has granted in Christ. Jesus asked Martha upon her brother’s death, “(E)veryone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” She responded affirmatively (Jn 11:26, 27).

Christians are destined for eternal activities and assignments in “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2Pet 3:13). In the parable of the minas (money), faithful slaves were given authority over “cities” (Lk 19:11-27). While God describes many general elements of the coming environment, He also informs the Christian, “(t)hings which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which has not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (1Cor 2:9). Over the decades, I have envisioned many phenomenal potentials for this coming destination. I have even made some very specific personal requests. But, I know that whatever I dream up will fall short of the reality. When I add the contemplations of other saints to mine over the millennia - all of which will be dwarfed - it is clear there is no way to grasp how utterly astounding the coming state will be. The specifics of that place “has not entered the heart of man” - **any man**. How can such a realization fail to create in me ... happiness ... and a longing to bring others in?

I remember reading of a Christian convert, in a cross cultural context, who was initially drawn to the Bible’s message upon learning that God had a plan for his life - now. This became a major factor in his conversion. Months later, he learned ... he was destined for heaven. He had no idea God had designs upon him past this life. Joy inexpressible became joy incalculable.

No Secular Work

On the heels of the revelations above ... is this one. The Bible tells us we are to do everything “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17) - and working with our “own hands” (manual labor) is designated by God Himself as “the good thing” (Eph 4:28). Even slaves in their labors were admonished to do their work “heartily” (literally, “from the soul”), knowing “(i)t is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Col 3:23-25). There is no such thing as “secular work” for a Christian. Everything is ministry. We will account for every detail of our Christian experience (at the Believers Judgment) and either receive reward or rebuke. Relegating the royal priesthood to thinking they are secularly employed, and laymen, are “doctrines of demons” - most likely authored by Satan himself (1Ti 4:1). Satan longs (and works) to strip us of our Savior’s blood-bought gifts.

The Christian is in a perpetual state of serving Jesus Christ from the moment of conversion into eternity. Work, performed in His Name, is forever elevated to ministry by our Employer. Blue Mondays are forever gone. Christians report to their workplace as employees of the King of all the kings. What was burden ... is now eternal opportunity. Our earthly employer is simply a beneficiary of this higher motivation now animating us. Happy ... is this the right word? Such a sea change is much deeper and broader. And, in the right circumstances, I have shared this motivation with various employers in the past. Responses have been ... interesting.

Thorns

One reason for thorns in this life ... is to wean me from it. They are tools in God's hands. While they may be physically, emotionally or vocationally "*destructive*," God still uses these matters for higher ends. "*And we know that God causes all things to work together toward good to those who continue loving God ...*" (Ro 8:28). Additionally, while I desire well-being, and work for it, that is no longer my sole, or even primary, goal. I am now free to make necessary stands for righteousness and "*wherever the tree falls, there it lies*" (Eccl 4:4). I can truly live ... with a clear conscience being my foremost priority. I can live vigorously, and promote life, but I no longer need to cling to this life. No longer must I compromise core issues in order to protect myself. I do not have to lie to keep a job. I do not have to cheat to preserve gains. I can choose to always do the right things and God will always meet me ... even if in the furnace - thorns and all (Dan 3:1-30). I do not know if this qualifies as personal happiness, but it sure establishes foundations for personal peace and genuine well-being, which to me is ... happiness.

And, one other thorn. Physical attractiveness. Even the most gorgeous woman, or most dashing man ... will not be so for long. It is astounding how quickly time levels outside appearances. In fact, if you line up a bunch of 80 year olds, it is very hard to know who was attractive ... and who was not. Fortunately, "*God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart*" (1Sam 16:7). While we should do the best with what we've got, He understands the physical holocaust of our present environment, and looks inside for beauty ... or ugliness. And it may be that the outward beauty granted in eternity ... will directly correspond to the inward beauty cultivated in this age. That ... would not surprise me.

Judgment Day

Just because individuals have decided their thoughts, and resultant actions, are superior to those in the Bible, that does not mean that the Author of those words has decided to honor such determinations. Though individuals have decided to live with "*no fear of God before their eyes*" that does not mean ... there is no God to be feared (Ro 3:18 and Lk 12:4,5). Bottom line ...

The abuses of morally accountable beings will not go unrequited. Atrocities large and small, world over, are being catalogued in their minutest detail by our Creator. Included in this detailing are the impacting influences of said activities. All this will be displayed in the presence of the abuser by his/her Creator on a fixed day in the future ... "*the great and terrible day of the Lord*" (Mal 4:5). Judgment Day is the creation of God - the climax to this age of rebellion. Along with the purposes of the cross, Judgment Day is the point of this entire exercise.

I have a friend and Christian brother who has been in the movie industry for over two decades. After studying its processes and dynamics, along with his Bible exposure, he is convinced that movies are an archetype of an innate, albeit subconscious, understanding of our own personal existence. "*We are all making our own movie*" - with our self as the main character. He believes this is the underlying reason we are fascinated and drawn by this art form. Our full length feature film will debut ... at the Judgment. Each detail of each scene will roll before the King of all kings - even the unspoken thoughts and secrets residing in the main character. There are "*billions and billions*" of these movies, from men and angels alike, and the Reviewer and Critic will thoroughly vet each one.

This brother also maintains he himself will be found in the movie of every person with whom he has intersected. Whether appearing in one scene, or many, he wants to be critiqued positively in each movie. "*This has helped me a lot.*" Well, this has dramatically impacted how I see my role in those around me too. Also, it will be incredible to view our "*performances*" in

the movies of those whom we have never physically met - whether attacking angels (1Pet 5:8), or ministering angels (He 1:14), or individuals influenced by our work and witness - for good or ill.

I have asked this brother to flesh this out. He said, *"I think I am on to something."* It is obvious I agree - and what I have shared here is a very small part of our conversations about this.

Concerning the Judgment itself, God relieves me from the need to *"get even"* when I am the subject of moral violation. *"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord'"* (Ro 12:19). It is actually a violation on my part to step in to His territory and job. This makes me very happy.

Low Moral Expectations

... of others. This may at first sound quite cynical. But it's not. One of the greatest Biblical masteries one can gain - is a realistic understanding of the nature of man. In fact, a lack in this arena will exact great penalties individually, organizationally, nationally and globally ... and spawns a great salt fountain of unhappiness. Again, the bottom line: *"(Y)our iniquities have made a separation between you and your God"* (Isa 59:2). It is not possible for creatures made in the image of God to operate in that image when separated from the source of it.

Long ago, I compared this to turning on an unplugged vacuum cleaner ... expecting it to work. But actually, the matter is **far worse**. Man, in his natural state, does turn on, but the power source is supplied by his *"father, the devil"* (Jn 8:44). *"The whole world lies in (literally, "reclines in") the power of the evil one"* (1Jn 5:19). This is AC power - **anti**, **alternative**, **abhorrent** current - **absent** God's morality, knowledge and wisdom. A vivid example of this AC current at work can be seen in Judas. On two occasions we are told, Satan *"entered into"* him (Lk 22:3 and Jn 13:27). There is no indication this was a hostile take-over. Satan simply accessed one of his own - providing an additional power surge as he sensed opportunity to forward his agenda. Judas was supplied *"a jolt"* to do ... what he already wanted to do. We probably see the same dynamic in the Sabeans and Chaldeans who attacked Job's family and possessions (Job 1:15,17). I am convinced this is common all around us.

None of us know how fast Satan can move from individual to individual, or how many like minded fallen angels join in this. But, I do know he (they) cannot be everywhere at once, and he (they) probably must to pick and choose what *"open doors"* to be entering/exiting as he (they) seek to kill and destroy as much as possible. I hope we find he (they) will have made **many** errors along the way ... much short circuiting - where DC current (direct current from God) prevailed.

Humans used by Satan (and his) are still fully accountable for their actions in these matters. Jesus told Pilate the one delivering Him up to him had *"the greater sin"* (Jn 10:11). Earlier, He told the disciples it would have been good for Judas had he *"not been born"* (Mt 26:24). So, when some heinous crime is followed with, *"the devil made me do it,"* or *"a voice told me to do it,"* there may indeed be an element of truth in the assertion ... but no innocence.

To expect unredeemed sinners, who reside *"in the dominion of Satan"* (Ac 26:18 and Col 1:13), to function morally is to set myself up for great personal unhappiness. This is not negative thinking ... it is realistic thinking. The natural man is *"alienated and hostile in mind"* to God and His values and priorities. This results in the natural man naturally being *"engaged in evil deeds"* (Col 1:21). Of course, the natural man does not see himself in this light, and that is why God says he is in darkness ... and blind (Jn 12:46, 1Pet 2:9, 2Pet 1:9, and 1Jn 2:11). The most vivid example of the benefit (happiness) that I have gained by this lowered, moral expectation of others involved ... my Dad.

As a young adult, I had many offenses against my Dad. Many were justified. But, they were still toxins in my soul. Then, just before my 24th birthday, I became a Christian. While I am sure some of these toxins may have been excised around that time, not all were. A few months into my Christian experience, he visited me as part of a “business trip” (I was a thousand miles from where I had been raised). One evening, he was walking in front of me, and for the first time ... I saw him as a creature of God who had lived his whole life separated from the source of genuine morality, justice, righteousness ... life. At that moment, everything inside me changed. I thought, *“I can’t believe he did as good as he did!”* All remaining toxins were immediately neutralized. It was an amazing moment, a freeing moment. Since then, when the negative memories resurface, the toxins just aren’t there. Adopting this mind set toward those outside of Christ has been of great value to me. I do **not** expect morality from them.

Unfortunately, **I have expected it** from professing Christians. This has resulted in a good deal of damage over the years. One brother, early on, talked to me about this. *“When unsaved people attack you, it doesn’t bother you, because you are expecting it. But you aren’t expecting it from Christians. So when that happens, you don’t understand it - and that is why it damages you.”* He was actually part of that group ... with a momentarily convicted conscience. Over the decades, the worst treatment I have experienced is at the hands of professing Christians. I still hold high expectations, but not quite as naively. My earlier referenced, movie making brother, recently catalogued his own version of this dynamic. He mused, *“As a new Christian, when I met someone who said, ‘I am a Christian, too!’ - I rejoiced with them and I was real happy. After some years, upon hearing the same claim, internally there was a hesitancy, ‘Umm ... okay.’ Now, when one professes to be a Christian, an interrogation begins: ‘Explain to me what you mean when you say, ‘I am a Christian, too!’ What exactly do you mean by that?’”*

Cynicism? Or, an accurate lowering of moral expectations - based upon Biblical understandings and experience? I will leave this judgment to you. *“And this produces personal happiness in you?”* Well, that may be the wrong way to put it ... but it sure has been personally positive. So, while I should demand high moral performance of myself, I now leave the movies of others to themselves and their Creator. And I let those who do right pleasantly surprise me ... in mine.

My Sin

... makes me personally unhappy. Many of my performances ... I would like to do a retake. But, that is not an option. Sin has really messed me up. And it is so subtle in its perverting power that I often do not see it until later ... when God exposes it. It then sickens me. I believe I am not alone in such matters. When Paul was discussing his own sin, he made a personal assessment, followed by a question, and concluded with a declaration. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* (Ro 7:24,25). God has promised that when I exit this life, what is left of my corrupt nature will be left here. This makes me very, very happy.

Fear

I still experience fear. But, my response to it has changed and, in some cases, also the subject matter. When threats to my well-being arise, I pray, *“Accomplish what concerns me, for I know ‘the days that were ordained for me’ were established by You ‘when as yet there was not one of them’”* (Ps 138:8 and 139:16). In His wisdom, He knows how to deliver His children from the *“fear of death”* (Heb 2:15) and in life - He opens doors *“which no one can shut”* (Rev 3:8). Only when the saint’s work is done ... will he/she exit. This is an astounding way to

approach life with all its dangers and threats. This empowers an individual to face, and work through, the confrontations of life with internal confidence. A fruit of such a heart set is ... happiness.

I do not want to leave the impression that when under life's assaults, I am automatically at the place just mentioned. There is a process leading to this destination - and it can be extremely intense. In Gethsemane, Jesus, "*being in agony ... was praying very fervently and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground*" ... and it was a cold evening (Lk 22:44 and Jn 18:18). Some believe His blood vessels were bursting, thus mingling in His sweat, so that it took on an appearance like blood. I don't know. But, I do know ... when He emerged from Gethsemane, He had arrived at the place referenced in the previous paragraph. His "*performance*" at the arrest, trials and execution was flawless. He overcame all the fears, angers, grief - or whatever comprised His "**agony**" in Gethsemane. I know my challenges will never rise to that level, so I know God can grant the necessary graces so I too can perform victoriously.

But, much of the subject matter causing me fear has also changed. For example, I fear for the fate of others, especially my children, their friends, extended family and people I have come to know and like. So, I pray. Even now, when thinking of some of them - knowing how tightly locked they are into their deceptions - I lower myself on their behalf as low as I can go. "*Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is there anything too difficult for Me?*" (Jer 32:27). "*No, there is no human too difficult for You to reach. But, You alone have the wisdom to do that. You alone 'understand (their) thought from afar' and are 'intimately acquainted with all (their) ways'*" (Ps 139:2,3). I fervently trust - that in these concerns - God will decide His "*mercy triumphs over judgment*" (Ja 2:13). This, when realized, will be a fount of unending happiness for me.

Insects

I love studying insects. This group of animals is amazingly diverse and complex. I have been infatuated by them from childhood. But now, when I examine their life cycles, migratory abilities, defensive body systems, or physical beauty - I see the handiwork of a Creator who is astoundingly ingenious. But such wonders are just a launchpad into the astounding wonders of this creation ... even a fallen creation! A verse to one of my songs seeks to capture this.

*"I love to smell the flowers that He made.
I love to feel a summer breeze while sittin' in the shade.
If He can make a fallen world so spell-bindin' ...
No tellin' what it's gonna be like in heaven!
Ha! Ha! Ha!"*

"Come On In!" - January, 1988.

When standing in awe in front of a spectacular sunset, I know I am looking at The Artist's work on one of His canvasses. And in the height of the awestruck moment, I always hear one more thing: "*Boy, you ain't seen nothing yet.*"

Studying any aspect of this creation, organic or inorganic, macro or micro, overwhelms the honest mind. All the combined knowledge of the keenest intellects who have focused on just one tiny sliver of this created order - only scratch the surface of the knowledge available in that field. Our Creator is so far beyond us in knowledge, wisdom and might ... it really is a joke. And when I realize that in Jesus Christ I am in eternally good standing with such a One, well, the

study of His insects, and other things in this order (even though fallen) ... creates much happiness in me.

Conclusion

It is impossible to cover all the elements in Jesus Christ that cause me to be ... “1. *favored by circumstances: lucky: fortunate* 2. *having, showing or causing a feeling of pleasure, joy, etc.*” I have lived on both sides of the conversion line and there is just no comparison. And His surprises make a Christian live in a state of incessant expectation. For example, this last weekend a man from Pakistan asked if he could translate my work into the Urdu language - with the potential of reaching a billion people in their native tongue. No mechanical translation device can capture the nuances of idiom, sarcasm and innuendo like a human translator can. Happiness? In Jesus Christ, the directions it comes from, and the places it leads, are as varied as God Himself.

Oh, yeah. Toward the end of my “**Songs Notebook**” I found this entry: “*It’s been a month now ... no rock gut feeling.*” Amazingly, 30+ years later, I can still vividly remember that feeling ... yet, it has never returned. Actually, I am not sure that it can. All the elements that constituted it have been confronted by the Author of the Bible, neutralized, and systematically replaced by “*the assurance of things hoped for*” and “*the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). But, as I have not yet “*finished the course*” (2Tim 4:7), I can envision some scenarios which might challenge a dogmatic declaration of victory on this matter at this time. But, when Jesus says, “*I am with you always (literally, “all the days”) even to the end of the age*” (Mt 28:20) it is possible, maybe even likely, that all the elements comprising a genuine personal happiness have been forever secured. That “*rock gut feeling*” may forever remain ... a memory.

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