

Title: Get on Board the Happiness Express
Date: April 24, 2022
Subject: Countering false notions of happiness and pointing to what God provides
Scripture: John 10:7 – 18

Henry Morris writes a devotional in Days of Praise (April 22, 2022) based on the promise of Jesus that his joy would be in us and that our joy may be complete (John 15:11). *The word “fun” is never mentioned the Bible, and “entertain” is used only in reference to being hospitable. Such activities as “reveling” and “playing” received nothing except condemnation in the Scriptures (with the exception of little children at play)... Actually, Christians can have something far better, more effective, and more lasting than fun and entertainment. In Christ they can have heavenly joy! “A merry heart does good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22), where the word for merry” is more commonly translated as “joyful” or “rejoicing.” While the Bible never mentions “fun,” it has many references to “joy” and “rejoicing”... “For the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).*

The same idea is conveyed by Jesus told the Heavenly Father, “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (John 17:13). Pulpit Commentary expands the meaning: “That they might have the joy that is mine fulfilled, fully unfolded and completed, in themselves.”

READ John 10:7 – 18

Jesus identifies himself through two “I AM” statements. He doubles down on them as he uses them twice. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. Both identities are for the benefit of the sheep.

The gate is a protective device. Ancient shepherds would lay down in the doorway of the stone enclosure. Anything or anyone who tried to enter would have to go over his dead body. This can be applied in a couple ways. Jesus gives himself to protect those who are his. He is the good shepherd who cares for his sheep and provides what they need.

The second way is Jesus’ dead body is the means of entering the fold as he stated he would lay down his life. We only get to safety from sin through Jesus.

One of the things that strikes me is how nice it is to be one of Jesus’ sheep. There are many benefits. Salvation: whoever enters through him is saved. Access: they will go in and come out. Food and rest: they will find pasture. Ownership: they belong to the shepherd. Personal connection: are known by the shepherd and know the shepherd. Valued: Jesus gave his life for the sheep. That’s a pretty good haul.

All of this is in contrast with the plans of those who aren’t the good shepherd. The hired hand doesn’t give two cents about the sheep. If an attack is perceived, he abandons the sheep quicker than greased lightning. Let them become a snack for the wolf. Who cares?

As for the wolf -- it has one thing in mind – lunch, lamb chops, rare.

The thief is only interested in himself, what he can get. If he can’t have it, he’ll kill and destroy so no one else can have it either.

The unholy triad of thief, hired hand and wolf conspire together to deprive the sheep of life. They first attempt to prevent sheep from gaining life. They don't want sheep to connect with Jesus who comes so his sheep may have life. They'll do everything in their power so that doesn't happen.

"Life" is a major theme of the Gospel of John. It's used three dozen times. Here's a sample including more of Jesus' "I AM" statements: "In him (Jesus Christ) was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (1:4); "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (3:16); "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (3:36); "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it...Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (5:21, 24); "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12); "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (10:28); "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (11:25, 26); "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6); "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

The life Jesus Christ gives is often equated with eternal life, of living with him and God the Father in heaven forever. It begins the moment a person places their personal trust in Jesus. The principal benefits we gain are a right relationship with God, forgiveness of sins and a guarantee of a place in heaven with him.

However, eternal life isn't a life people have to wait to experience until they cross over into heaven. It has impact immediately. The person has a different kind of life available through Jesus.

John 10:10 states this life is to the full. There are other translations. Some use similar language of full as in fully or in all its fullness. Others speak of a rich and satisfying life. Still others talk about overflowing life. The majority phrase it in tones of abundant life, abundantly, an abundance of life. Sometimes the word "more" modifies abundantly but as Ellicott says: "The word "more" is an insertion of the English version without any authority, and it weakens the sense. It is not that a greater is compared with a less abundance, but that the abundance of life which results through Christ's coming is contrasted with the spiritual wants and death which He came to remove."

We're focusing on experiencing the present spiritual life Christ has for us. "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). These are things beneficial for our welfare.

God desires to work in our lives while we're on earth to give full, purposeful, meaningful, fulfilling lives. We can phrase it in terms of joy, contentment, satisfaction, wholeness, well-being. True happiness.

People want happiness. Kathy Caprino wrote an article for the Huffington Post - "The Top Ten Things People Want in Life but Can't Seem to Get" (12/6/2017, huffingtonpost.com/kathy-caprino/the-top-10-things-people). She found the most cherished goal for people was...drumroll, cymbal crash... happiness.

The problem is many people look for deep and lasting happiness in the wrong places, things that may be able to give some temporary bliss but fall short of true happiness. The thief, hired hand and wolf, who oppose what Jesus came to give, represent the false pursuits of happiness that steal, kill and destroy. They seek to rob the sheep of life and enjoyment. They mislead with their bogus promises. They're braggers who make claims they can't cash because they don't have enough in the bank.

To know what happiness is, it helps to know what happiness ain't. There are lots of imitators and misconceptions about what happiness is and provides.

One of the major ones is money, not just money but money, money, money, money, money. It's the desire for it and allowing it to rule one's life. People go to great lengths to accumulate money and possessions. They wrap themselves in the materialistic cloak. They think if they only have enough money, they can buy happiness or what will lead to happiness. However, studies find that people who have a bajillion dollars, people who've won the lottery are no happier than ordinary people. They had a temporary thrill of hitting it big, but reality set in and their lives are the same as they were beforehand, maybe even worse because everybody has their hand out asking for a share of the pot.

Another imitator is fame and popularity. Fame is fleeting. The origin of the saying goes back to Roman times when a conquering general was allowed a "triumph," a parade through the streets. However, Caesar had commanded that a slave stand in the chariot next to the general and continuously whisper into his ear "*All glory is fleeting.*"

Then there's pleasure, the fulfillment of human passions and desires. Drive this car and you'll be happy. Buy a new spring wardrobe and you'll be happy. Go on an exotic vacation and you'll be happy. Or in Charlie Brown's case, "Happiness is a warm puppy." These things can make you happier but that's not the totality of happiness.

There's the focus on human relationships. If we expect some person to make us happy, we're putting a lot of pressure on that person. What if the person has a bad day or somehow doesn't measure up?

Others count on good health. It can be taken away in an instant.

Many equate happiness with the absence of sadness and sorrow. They feel they can only be happy if nothing bad ever, ever happens to them.

And others stress that happiness is to be expressed on the surface, on our faces. There's the old Sunday school song "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands...then your face will surely show it." No, not necessarily. A person can experience true happiness in the Lord but it doesn't mean they'll be walking around with a smile on their face when they've gone through devastating difficulties and tragedies. We don't just paste on smiles.

In 2010 the Harris Poll began conducting a Survey of American Happiness. The highest index during those years was 35%. 1/3 of Americans said they were happy. Maybe that's because of wrong ideas about what happiness is.

Max Lucado describes the front door to happiness often utilized by advertising companies: “Acquire, retire, and aspire to drive faster, dress trendier and drink more. Happiness depends on what you hang in your closet, park in your garage, mount on your trophy wall, deposit in your bank account, experience in your bedroom, wear on your wedding finger, or serve at your dining table. Happiness happens when you lose the weight, get the date, find the mate, or discover your fate” (How Happiness Happens, p. 6).

Sometimes we allow these approaches to life to infiltrate our lives. Though we know Jesus Christ is our Savior, we partially operate by standards of the world system. We experience problems such as confusion about what is true happiness. We grow grumpier and more sour in our disposition. We become frustrated by the stuff of life. We complain because things aren't going the way we expect or think or as easily. It's easy to operate by expectations that life should be according to my wishes, plans, hopes and dreams.

We need to be operating at a different level. God says he has a better way of providing true happiness.

I conducted an internet search on the definition of spiritual happiness. Almost 62 million results in .67 seconds. The top results included the need for spiritual centering, getting in touch with your spiritual side, being favored by luck or fortune and a whole host of other eastern mystical religious ideas. I switched to “Christian definition.” Sites discussed various aspects of the topic like the difference between happiness and joy. When one source was trying to describe “What is Christian happiness?”, he remarked about the difficulty of trying to put it all in one sentence. He said if he was forced to do so, his one sentence would be: “Christian happiness is the grace of loving and being loved by Jesus who gave his life for me.” (David Murray on christianity.com).

That's an excellent statement. True happiness begins with what we think, understand, know and believe about God. Does God really and truly love us? It's easy for us to spout out John 3:16. Are we really gripped by the fact God loves you and me so incredibly that he gave his one and only Son to die for you and me?

The New Year brought a new opportunity to read through the Bible which means I've been spending time in the opening books of the Old Testament. I've come to the wonderful fifth book of the Bible – Deuteronomy or as the talk to text on my computer put it: “doot erana me” or “dude are onomy.” Deuteronomy means “repetition of the law.” I've zipped through some of the law-ish kinds of verses. What I'm noticing is God's relationship with the Jewish people. “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deuteronomy 7:7 – 9).

A similar thing could be said about Christ followers: The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more special or had a better pedigree. But it was because the Lord loved you, therefore he redeemed you. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments

God does what he does because he is a loving God who keeps his covenant of love for a thousand generations. We are to know that God is a loving God. Count on it. Bank on it. Stake our lives on it.

I'm also marking in the responses people are to give to God. Moses constantly asked and begged people to hold fast and cling to God (4:4), to not forget what their eyes have seen or let them slip from their hearts as long as they live (Deuteronomy 4:9), to remember the day they stood before the Lord their God 4:10).

Moses pleads with them: "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; Ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any God ever tried to make for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by mighty hand and outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God; Besides him there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:32 - 35).

We could again say similar things about followers of Jesus Christ: "Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; Ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any God ever tried to make for himself one nation out of many people groups by miraculous signs and wonders like all the things the Lord your God did for you in the death and resurrection of Jesus? You were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God; Besides him there is no other."

True happiness begins with knowing Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord. We experience forgiveness of our sins and receive eternal life. Ponder it, think about it.

Over the next weeks we'll find true happiness often involves giving, reaching outside of self. We have no better example than that of Jesus of Nazareth. He lived a happy fulfilled life which is marked by giving.

Pastor and hymn writer Ira Stanphill had a gift for writing songs. He would sometimes begin church services by asking his congregation for lines for a song. When it came time for the message he would first sing the song he had composed. He also wrote them in more conventional ways. One song he wrote was "for no particular reason other than the truth of the title." "Happiness is to know the Savior, Living a life within His favor, Having a change in my behavior... Happiness is a new creation, Jesus and me in close relation, Having a part in His salvation... Happiness is to be forgiven, Living a life that's worth the livin', Taking a trip that leads to heaven. Happiness is the Lord...Real joy is mine, No matter if teardrops start. I've found the secret. It's Jesus in my heart."