

Title: Hindrances on the Happiness Highway
Date: June 26, 2022
Subject: There are hindrances to true happiness.
Scripture: Philippians 4:4

Wisconsin has two seasons - winter and road construction. Both make traveling more “interesting”? Add in deer crossing not where the deer crossing signs are, as one Flatlander thought was the intent of the signage, the occasional loose cow, potholes, heaving pavement from heat or frost – plenty of impediments to travel.

There are hindrances on the happiness highway – obstacles, potholes, detours. We have a choice whether we’re going to smack into them and take them or if we’ll seek to avoid them. In the opening to the series we stressed one of them - ignorance of God’s true happiness which leads to false expectations.

READ Philippians 4:2 - 9.

The larger passage provides the surrounding context with related teachings. Our focus is going to be on v. 4. It's pretty obvious what the keyword is - rejoice. The words joy, rejoice and various forms are used in this letter 16 times which is known as the Epistle of Joy. Authors have used that theme for the titles of their books: Bound for Joy (Stuart Briscoe), Be Joyful (Warren Wiersbe), Serving with Joy (Steven Grunlan), How to Have Joy (Precept Upon Precept) and Living Above the Circumstances (Accent on Life Bible Curriculum). Apparently, the last author didn't get the memo about needing to have joy in the title.

Maybe the last author was focusing on Paul’s situation. The tone isn’t what is expected from a person in prison. The extremely uplifting book speaks of having joy and rejoicing in the Lord.

Descriptions of joy and rejoice. “Biblical joy is choosing to respond to external circumstances with inner contentment and satisfaction, because we know that God will use these experiences to accomplish His work in and through our lives” (Christianity.com). “**Joy** is a feeling of inner gladness, delight or rejoicing. **Joy** in the NT is virtually always used to signify a feeling of "happiness" that is based on spiritual realities (and independent of what "happens")...a deep seated pleasure. It is a depth of assurance and confidence that ignites a cheerful heart. It is a cheerful heart that leads to cheerful behavior. **Joy** is not an experience that comes from favorable circumstances but is God’s gift to believers...**Joy** is the deep-down sense of well-being that abides in the heart of the person who knows all is well between himself and the Lord” (Preceptaustin.org).

The command in v. 4 is simple in that it comes in one word - rejoice. It's not simple because it's not easy to do. Yet, it's what we’re to do. We’re to rejoice in the Lord always. Some translators say that “always” should come first as that’s what’s emphasized in the original. Always rejoice. The reason to rejoice is the Lord. He is the giver of joy and it’s in him we find our joy.

John MacArthur: “The key, of course, is to look away from the changing circumstance to the unchangeable God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the unchangeable benefits and blessings of our salvation, and the

unchangeable promise of eternal heaven, so that the joyful Christian thinks more of his Lord than his personal difficulties, more of his spiritual riches in Christ than his poverty on earth, and more of his glorious fulfillment in heaven than his present pain. Therein lies our joy” (gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-266/Rejoice-Always)

Many of the teaching topics we’re exploring for The Happiness Highway have roots in Jesus’ teaching the night before he died on the cross. He addressed how his followers were to live out their lives. It shouldn't surprise us that the Savior spoke of joy and being full of joy almost 10 times. He expressed his desire that his joy would be in those who follow him, that their joy may be complete; their grief would turn to joy even as a woman who goes through labor is an anguish but turns to joy when the child is born; the promise of seeing him in heaven as an occasion to rejoice when no one can take away our joy; and that we'd be able to have the full measure of his joy within us now (John 15:11; 16:20, 21, 22, 24; 17:13).

The goal is set before us – joy, true happiness, rejoicing during our lives. However, there are hindrances which impact our having joy, being joyful and rejoicing.

I. Hindrance #1 - sin.

Sin is a catch-all term covering a broad area but it's useful because we don't have to try to mention every sin. Imagine trying to do that each time the subject arises. There are some in the Christian community who inaccurately think if their particular sin isn't mentioned, they're off the hook, what's being taught doesn't apply to them. Not so.

Sin is a deviation from the road God desires us to travel. It's caused when we choose to take our own path. It should produce guilt and shame because of disappointing God. If we don't feel those things when we sin, we're getting callous toward God, his commands and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

In 2 Samuel we find the account of King David committing numerous sins (2 Samuel 11, 12): adultery with Bathsheba, having her husband murdered, bringing people into a conspiracy to cover up his sins, abuse of power as the shepherd of Israel. David and Bathsheba may have thought they got away with something, but they didn't. It turned out to be an exceptionally long nine months, not of joy and anticipation of a child being born, but of being under the weight of unconfessed sin as he stumbled and bumbled down the wrong road.

David had sought joy through temporary pleasure but there was a huge price for despising the Lord's word by doing evil. The son born to him as a result of his fling died seven days after being born. During that week David was in agony as he fasted and spent nights lying on the ground as he pleaded with God for the child's life. There'd be more deaths as the sword would never depart from his house. His son Absalom would rebel by setting himself up as king to replace David forcing David to flee for his life.

David was confronted by the prophet Nathan for his sins. The Psalm directly connected is Psalm 51. David cried out: “Have mercy on me, oh God, according to your unfailing love; According to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge” (Psalm 51:1 - 4).

We heard earlier from Psalm 32: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”- and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:3 - 5).

He expressed the desire to be cleansed, washed and have a new heart created in him. He wanted joy to again be part of his life: “Let me hear joy and gladness; Let the bones you have crushed rejoice...Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51: 8, 12).

David came to the place where he was willing to trade the temporary for the eternal. He wanted to find joy again in God and what he has provided, in his salvation. Likewise, when we sin, we need to turn back to God. Admit our sin, turn from it and seek restoration. We need to keep short accounts with him.

II. Hindrance #2 - self

Self-importance and the desire to elevate ourselves into the control position is often the root cause of sin. The push to put self in the driver’s seat is strong. There's a tendency to view our journey through life as a parade, taking the position of king or queen on the float, waving to our adoring public. We want to be the one who decides our path, to make the decisions.

It’s like a child who says they want to do things by themselves. It's an important part of growing up to learn to be independent and do some tasks. But it's not a good thing if striving for complete independence and separatism continues so the person becomes more and more self-focused.

David Brooks conducted research for a book: “We collected data to suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe. It wasn’t hard to find such data...between 1948 and 1954, psychologists asked more than 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12 percent said yes. The same question was revisited in 1989, and this time...it was 80 percent of boys and 77 percent of girls.

“Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as “I like to be the center of attention...I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary...Somebody should write a biography about me.” The median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago” (David Brooks, *The Road to Character*).

There are costs of a self-guided, self-focused journey. Because we view our thoughts, motives, desires, etc. as better and superior, and not simply as one alternative, we can develop some major hindrances especially when things don't happen our way. These include complaining (having a critical spirit and finding fault with others), anger, hurt feelings and more.

Dr. Paul Hauck in his book *Overcoming Frustration and Anger* writes, “Millions of frustrations are far more easily tolerated than we usually think. Children not finishing their dinner is not an awful frustration,

just the waste of a few cents. And if a few cents bothers you, put the plate in the refrigerator until later. A person swerving in front of you in traffic is not doing something that calls for a nuclear explosion. It isn't awful to have someone honking his horn politely behind you - it's only slightly annoying. Not getting your raise can hurt your pocketbook, but not you, unless you let it. And that's the point, isn't it? Frustrations are not usually earth shaking to begin with - they can be tolerated quite nicely if we make the effort. Secondly, frustrations, even if they *are* severe, don't have to lead to disturbances unless we allow them to. Reacting with anger is like throwing a cactus at someone with your bare hands; He may get hurt, but so will you!" (Hauck, p. 65).

Anger isn't a solution to frustration but a reaction. Christian counselor Norman Wright provides a simple definition of anger: "a strong feeling of irritation or displeasure." He continues: "The energy of anger does not have to be unleashed in a manner that will hurt or destroy. Instead it can be used in a constructive manner to *eliminate* the frustration" (Living Beyond Worry and Anger, p. 26). He recommends questions to ask when we're angry: "Do I feel hurt? Am I experiencing frustration over something?... Am I afraid of something at this time" (ibid, p. 25).

Wright outlines four methods of dealing with anger: repress which is not admitting it and burying it; suppress, holding it in which can be stuffing it down or choosing to not give outlet to it; express which can be verbal and violent outbursts or doing something to work off the anger such as taking a walk; and the best is confess mixed with healthy suppression/self control through admitting are angry and facing it. "Confess the fact that you are angry - to yourself, to God, and to the person involved. Don't say, "You're making me angry." The individual is not making you angry. You are responsible for your own emotional reaction toward him. You could say, "The way our discussion is going, I'm getting angry. I'm not sure that's the best reaction so perhaps we could start over in our discussion." Or, "I'm sorry but I'm angry. What can I do now so we can resolve our differences?" Try admitting and confessing your anger" (ibid, p. 33).

James Dobson, formerly of Focus on the Family offers more counsel, "But how can intense negative feelings be resolved or ventilated without blasting away at the offender - an act which is specifically prohibited by the scripture? Are there other ways of releasing pent up emotions? Yes, including those that follow: By making the irritation a matter of prayer. By explaining our negative feelings to a mature and understanding "third party" who can advise and lead. By going to an offender and a showing a spirit of love and forgiveness. By understanding that God often permits the most frustrating and agitating events to occur, so as to teach us patience and to help us grow. By realizing that no offense by another person could possibly equal our guilt before God, yet he has forgiven us; Are we not obligated to show the same mercy to others?" (Dr. James Dobson Talks About Anger, pp. 16, 17).

On the issue of complaining we find helpful guidance from O. G. Wilson: "Like all men, the believer is exposed to physical difficulties and disease. He may experience losses in business, endure social trials, and face inconsistency in those he once regarded as true. If on those days he turns to complaining and self-pity, the "song of the Lord" is hushed to silence. "I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed," says the Psalmist

(Psalm 77:3). It is always so. If Satan is allowed to drive a little wedge of complaint into the soul, at once all its inner fortitude and strength ebbs away. I murmured because I had to walk four blocks from the parking lot to my office. Then I saw a man who was sick, hungry, and unable to take a step and yet whose smile was as cheery as the chirp of the first robin of spring. I complained because the light was poor. Then I met a man radiantly happy, from whose eyes all sight had been lost due to an accident. I complained about paying so much income tax until I visited a rest home where a penniless man was singing joyously the triumphant songs of grace.”

Complaining is addressed earlier in the book of Philippians. READ Philippians 2:14 - 16A. We can't rejoice and complain at the same time.

Followers Jesus Christ aren't independent contractors. We're pilgrims moving down the road with others in the same direction. Sharing the road is a good travel tip.

As I was preparing the message, a song popped into my mind. It's by Willie Nelson - “On the road again. Just can't wait to get on the road again. The life I love is making music with my friends...Like a band of gypsies we go down the highway. We're the best of friends. Insisting that the world keep turning our way. And our way...Is on the road again.” Makes the point except for that part about insisting the world turn our way... We aren't solo highwaymen.

The ultimate travel companion is God. He is to be the one who gives direction to our lives. He's the one who has set us on the narrow road that leads to life and heaven. And he desires for us to walk with him.

III. Hindrance #3 - forgetfulness

READ Psalm 103:2.

The people of Israel were forewarned to not forget God after they entered the Promised Land. The occasion would arise when things were going wonderfully for them and somehow, they would come to the conclusion they were able to achieve all they experienced all by themselves (Deuteronomy 8:10 - 20). Sadly, that's what happened. They didn't remember the Lord their God and what he had done – taken them out of Egypt, miraculously defeated their enemies, provided for their needs.

Followers of Christ need to not forget. Psalm 103 lists some of the benefits of what the Lord has done for his people. It's similar to the reminders in Ephesians 1. The Almighty Sovereign of the universe has provided forgiveness, redemption, satisfaction, renewal. He has acted with love, compassion, mercy, patience. He is slow to anger. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgressions from us. He is a good, good Father” (Psalm 103:11, 12).

We shouldn't give into wanderlust and try other stuff. We shouldn't gawk at the scenery and failed to pay attention to the road. We need to have grateful hearts and take time to think and praise God for his benefits. We constantly need to focus on the Lord to bring our attention back on him, who he is, what he's done, doing and will do. Rejoice in the Lord.

Joy is a choice. Adversity is inevitable. Misery is optional. Again I say rejoice.