

CREATED FOR HAPPINESS: Understanding Your Life in God

Comments by Rev. Cindi McKee based on a study written by Cynthia A. Bond Hopson

2105 Mission U Study for UMW

Let us pray....Lord, we have come to this place from all walks of life....from our chaotic lives and rusty, dusty routines, from all that was and is to all that might be, to the possibilities. We welcome you to our midst and ask that you be near us and breathe your gentle mercies on us so we may leave this place renewed. Amen.

Are you happy? What would you say are the things that make for true happiness in the human life? What are the components that make our hearts sing with joy and that bring contentment to our spirits and allow us to say “it is well with my soul!”

The American forefathers thought being happy was so fundamental to our wellbeing that they included the concept in the famous words of the Declaration of Independence”Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!”

The writer of our study, *Created for Happiness: Understanding our Life in God*, Cynthia Bond Hopson, asserts in the books’ introduction that we live in a time when the search for happiness has become a dominant topic in our culture. Any Internet search for happiness and related topics will yield multiple searches-one count was 2,810,000! More than any human being could possibly read or absorb. Included in the information is everything from happiness reminders, quotes, sayings, stories, memories and songs, to special order pencils. People share techniques for being happy in magazines, books and even websites.

For many years now, it has been common for Christians to think of happiness as an unimportant goal, reserving the word “joy” for the true satisfaction of Christian life. This distinction between happiness (pleasant but temporary earthly feelings) and joy (lasting contentment in relationship with God), though, is a fairly recent development. For centuries, Christians did not see happiness as less than joy. Notable theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas shared their views on happiness. Augustine is well known for having said that we are restless until we rest in God, and resting in God’s blessed life brings us true happiness. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the things (like wealth and power) that we think will bring happiness do not. He knew that the only happiness that would not disappoint us was happiness in God.

The early Methodist tradition used the language of happiness often. John Wesley preached about happiness almost as often as he preached about holiness. Indeed, for him, happiness and holiness were together the goal of Christian life. He had much to say about what genuine happiness ought to be, and when it was understood properly, happiness and salvation belong together.

Not only did John Wesley preach and teach about happiness but his brother Charles wrote hymns about happiness that the early Methodists sang. The Wesleys and the early Methodists could focus so much on happiness because they understood it to be biblical to do so. The happiness they sought was happiness in God, and so the happiness they found was the most secure and fulfilling. As we seek an active and meaningful spiritual life, we are about seeking and learning to live the life that God calls us to. A life of hope, of caring, of love, of forgiveness, of grace.

“Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, or worn. It is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace and gratitude.” –Denis Waitley

There is a story that’s been shared on social media that is helpful in thinking about how our choices and attitudes affect our spiritual life and then in turn affect our happiness. There was a 92 year old woman who was well-poised and proud, fully dressed each morning by eight o’clock, with her hair fashionably coifed and makeup perfectly applied, even though she is legally blind and on this day was moving to nursing home. Her husband of 70 years had recently passed away, making the move necessary.

She had waited for several hours in the lobby of the nursing home when she was finally told that her room was ready and she smiled. As she guided her walker to the elevator, staff members provided a visual description of her small room, including many details. “I love it,” she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

“Mrs. Jones, you haven’t seen the room yet...just wait.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” she replied. “Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is arranged, it’s how I arrange my mind. I already decided to love it. It’s a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice; I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open I’ll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I’ve stored away, just for this time in my life.”

She went on to explain, “Old age is like a bank account, you withdraw from what you’ve put in. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories. Thank you for your part in filling my memory bank. I am still depositing.”

And with a smile, she said: “Remember the five simple rules to be happy.”

- Free your mind from hatred. 2. Free your mind from worries.
- Live simply. 4. Give more. 5. Expect less.

So what can we learn from this story about how we approach our own spiritual lives? What do you choose to focus on in the morning when you get up out of bed? Are you content with your choices or do you need to make some changes to what you pursue in your relationship with God?

Knowing that God desires happiness for us and that true happiness comes from a rich and right relationship with God gives us focus for our spiritual work all throughout our lives. It seems that we live in a constant tension between the altar of consumerism and the altar of the living God. An awareness of the influence of the media on our thoughts and behaviors is important. Where do we get our information about what is important in life?

Popular author and speaker Nell W. Mohney, who writes extensively on spiritual disciplines and joyous living, explains that, “the basic answer to happiness is a spiritual one.”

The Bible teaches us that happiness is based on our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke specifically about happiness in the way the law of God does. The Hebrew word “asher” and the Greek word “makarios” both mean happy and blessed. Both Matthew and Luke use the word “makarios” to begin his sayings in the recordings of the Sermon on the Mount. Many English translations use the word “blessed” to begin each saying, but some translations begin with the word “happy”. When John Wesley wrote notes to the New Testament for his Methodist preachers, he began each beatitude with “happy”. Let’s read this scripture out loud together using the word “happy” in place of “blessed”.

Matthew 5: 1-11...

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

- ³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- ⁴ *Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*
- ⁵ *Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*
- ⁶ *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*
- ⁷ *Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*
- ⁸ *Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*
- ⁹ *Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*
- ¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- ¹¹ *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*

Jesus is suggesting to us what our duty is by telling us what will make us truly happy. God will be with us in all these experiences of life and that will connect us to the source of life that brings ultimate hope, healing, love and peace.

Living in peace is part of those things that make for happiness. Peace is a living, growing network of relationships called “shalom” in the Bible. Shalom embodies positive peace. It is harmony, well-being, wholeness, and positive relationship with God, fellow humans, community, and creation.

The pursuit of happiness brings us into harmony and solidarity with all of God’s creation, with majestic creatures, both great and small, and allows us to seek, build, and live in the beloved community.

What are some of the things that you could do to simplify your life and increase your chances of happiness? What in your spiritual life needs to be “updated” for a closer walk with God.

John Wesley understood “scriptural holiness” as the goal of the Christian life, and he connected it with happiness through his understanding of the image of God. Theologians understood that we were made to be in relationship with God—to love and worship God. If human nature is made for this relationship, then human nature is fulfilled by this relationship. Wesley would

assert that problems come when we allow our desire for other things to displace God in our lives. When this happens, we cannot be happy and find ourselves miserable. When Wesley talks about being happy in God, he is not talking about merely feeling lighthearted, nor was he talking about just having fun. He meant a deep contentment and fulfillment that comes from knowing that your life is what it is supposed to be. Wesley believed that the root of our misery is that we do not love as we should. We need to learn to love well, and grace enables us to do that. In order to direct our love to God above all else, we need to know how much God loves us. Each of us needs to know that God's revelation of love in Jesus Christ is meant for us personally and is available to us now! When we know God's love for us so that we are able to love God as we should, we are in truly right relationship with God. Loving God above all else changes us so that we begin to see the world as God sees it. We love what God loves and value what God values. Wesley believed that the love of a Christian must be expressed, it must lead to outward actions. If we love God, we will do the things that bring us closer to God. For Wesley, that meant we will make use of the means of grace available to us...prayer, reading, meditating on scripture and receiving Holy Communion. Wesley believed that when love is rooted in the heart, it cannot help but send out branches and bear fruit. Wesley believed that the only way to lasting, true happiness is satisfying the desire for God.

If the way to gain the happiness that Wesley talked about is to pursue holiness, then how do we do that? In the Methodist way it takes discipline to pursue the holiness that brings happiness. One part of this was to do works of "mercy". These works of mercy meant that a person was present for another person in need—whether sick, in prison, or hungry—and by being present we grow in humility, patience, and other fruit that show how the Holy Spirit is working in us. If the spirit of God is at work in you, then you have something to share for the glory of God at work in the world.

In connection with works of mercy, Wesley believed that works of piety directly related to our relationship and dependence on God. These works of piety Wesley termed as means of grace and included searching scripture (reading, hearing, meditating), public and private prayer, and receiving the Lord's Supper. Each of these activities serves the purpose of drawing us closer to God so that we are shaped by the power and presence of God that we encounter in these experiences.

Loving God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves is the hallmark of the Methodist tradition. When we do these well and are fully surrendered to the gifts from God in these hallmarks, it is then that we will find the deep happiness we so long for and that we were created for in our relationship with God.

It is clear that we live in a tension between desiring God above all else and being drawn in to desire the things of the world first and foremost. When our main focus is our own gain, then we become less concerned about the effects of our lives on others. We displace God as the model for our lives when we allow ourselves to be shaped by the attitudes and actions of those who care nothing for God. If we desire true happiness in our hearts of hearts we must be true to the true God who gives us happiness. Our loyalty is always being tempted and our spiritual journey is in part an exercise to be faithful to the one who is always faithful to us.

A happy heart is one that lives for others, so the works God has given us to do for our neighbor also contribute to our happiness by making us more generous and helpful. A heart that is thankful to God and that lives for others will be truly content.

Charles Wesley wrote over 6,000 hymns. The words of “Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies” illustrates how he thought we should look at our relationship with God and about what God offers us. Let’s sing the words together: (no. 173 in the hymnal)

*Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
Triumph o’er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Day-star, in my heart appear.*

*Dark and cheerless is the morn
Unaccompanied by Thee;
Joyless is the day’s return
Till Thy mercy’s beams I see;
Till they inward light impart,
Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.*

*Visit then this soul of mine,
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiancy divine,
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.*

Let us be in a spirit of prayer....Gracious and holy God, we belong to you, heart, mind, body and spirit. You shower us with patience and mercy and for that we are grateful. Remind us, Lord, that your plan is for us to be happy and whole and we will seek your will in being so. We will go now in peace. Amen.

