Pursuing Happiness \_Part 1

This message is about finding happiness in a stressful world. It comes out of the letter of Paul to the Philippians.

I will be preaching on this subject for the next three weeks. I chose this message because I understand how challenging life is, particularly during this unprecedented time of worry about our health and economic wellness.

As a pastor, I talked to a lot of people, diverse people, and one thing most of us have in common is that we want to live well. We want to provide to our families and find happiness in this life. Nevertheless, most of us struggle to get there. And it is not a matter of being rich or poor; I see a lot of sadness and brokenness at every level of society. Although financial security does help with some needs in life, at the core, no money in this world can buy true happiness. And that is what I am going to talk about today: true, everlasting, non-contingent upon anything from this world happiness.

As an introduction, I want to begin by saying what I believe: God wants us to be happy. I know some people may disagree with this initial statement, but let me explain.

God did not create us to be miserable, to suffer, or even to lack anything. God’s design for us was good, to be fruitful and lasting. The pain, suffering, and death we experience now was not part of God’s purpose for us. Although we do endure great trials in this life due to how poorly we treat one another, that does not change the initial goal of God for us.

So, if we are not pursuing happiness despite the challenges and opposition we face, then we are missing the point of living, what God intended for us to do. And, what we end up learning and doing is that we are not supposed to enjoy life but to endure it. This is true to the point that many may feel guilty of being happy because they are not supposed to.

Can you imagine God seeing you and saying: “oh, she is too happy; let’s send her pain to remind her how miserable she needs to be.”

My friends, nothing could be further from the truth. God is not against our wellness and happiness. That is contrary to the gospel of Jesus.

Now, I am not going to be naïve and suggest that finding happiness is an easy task because it is not. So, let’s study this subject.

How can we find happiness in a stressful world? The first thing we need to realize has to do with something I just mentioned: most people don’t enjoy life, they endure it.

What I mean by this is that many of us think that life must be perfect for us to be happy. “If I could just change my current situation, life would be great. If I could just get rid of all my problems, life would be fine.”

But the problem with this is that there is no such thing as a problem-free life. Happiness is not the absence of problems. If we are going to learn to be happy, joyful, we must learn to be joyful regardless of the adverse situations and problems we may be experiencing.

The apostle Paul learned about this kind of happiness and joy and spoke about it as he was enduring heavy trials.

Let’s take a look at Paul’s letter to the Philippians 1:12-19,

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

What is Paul saying, and how does this have anything to do with happiness? Let’s get some context.

The last four years of Paul’s life were miserable. He spent two years in prison in Caesarea, and then he was put on a ship to go to Rome to appear before Nero (known for his cruelty against Christians).

On his way to Rome, he is shipwrecked and stranded on an island. There he was bitten by a poisonous snake and survived the winter there too. Then, he continued to Rome and spent another two years in prison awaiting trial to be executed.

During these two years in Rome, he was chained to a guard for 24 hours a day. He had absolutely no privacy.

Yet, despite all of these situations, Paul says in Philippians 1:18b “…I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.”

From this passage we see that he seemed positive and happy with his lot, despite being locked up in prison and facing an uncertain future.

So, what’s Paul’s secret? How does he stay so positive in prison, rising above his troubles, and being joyful even though everything had not turned out the way he planned it?

Let’s be clear, he had every reason to be bitter and angry and to complain non-stop to God, yet he rejoices. (Whatever Paul had, I want that, don’t you?)

The answer is that he was not looking at his life through the lens of his suffering but through the lens of his faith. Paul could see the bigger picture. His perspective as a believer in Jesus was the source of his happiness.

This is so important for us to know. All of us have problems. However, our issues are not as important as how we are looking at those problems. The way we look at our problem is much more important than the problem itself.

When you are looking for the wrong, for loss, for reasons and excuses why you are unhappy you may find a long list. In the same way, when you are looking for reasons to be grateful, to believe, to love, to hope and be encouraged you will find a much longer list.

Paul had a long list of reasons to make him so unhappy and bitter but he was rising above his troubles because he was holding onto God’s hand, he was holding on the relationships and prayers of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

His perspective was not from the bottom-up but from up-down. And, just like him, our perspective makes the difference in how we experience life here and now. If you are looking for losses you will find them if you are looking for hope you will find it too.

Now, considerer what Paul said in 1:12, “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.”

With this, Paul is saying, “I can see the best, even in the worst. I can see God at work in the problems even when life does not go my way.”

This is almost an identical repeat of Joseph’s words to his brothers, who sold him to Egypt. In Genesis 50:19-20, Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid… You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Did you know that Paul wrote most of his letters from prison? Our New Testament is in part made up of letters that were written by Paul while he was unfairly jailed. This not only benefited Paul in completing his writings, but also led others to fulfil their purpose. Listen again to what he said in 1:14, “[Because of my chains] most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”

So, Paul is now also rejoicing in his imprisonment because it encouraged others to speak courageously about the gospel? Amazing. Everything that is considered bad (from the human perspective) and provides the grounds to any person to be upset and disappointed, Paul is turning it into an opportunity to see the good coming out of it.

Let’s be careful here. We are not justifying the wrong done to Paul because of the good that God was doing despite it. Wrong is wrong, and we must always work for justice and the wellness of others. In fact, this is precisely what Paul and the others were doing. In many ways, their happiness was coming from doing good even against powers that were opposing them.

The miracle here is that no evil in this world can stop the goodness coming from God to us. Romans 8:28 sums up this principle: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...”

My friends, our lives are not controlled nor limited by the adversity we face or by the intentions and actions of those that may oppose us, God always works a way for us to give us a future. This should give us a better understating about our own circumstances instead of being remorseful. This is the perspective we need.

In conclusion, the lesson in this first message of three is that happiness does not come from the absence of trouble or pain, or from having everything in this world but from the peace within us that comes from our faith in knowing that there is more to life than just today; that there is always a better tomorrow, and that we will get there by taking God’s hand. And that when we are doing what is just and good by contributing to the wellness of others (for Paul was the spreading of the gospel of Jesus), there is nothing in this world that can take our joy, our happiness away.

Question: What is your perspective in life right now? How do you look at yourself and your life as a whole? Are you guided by faith and hope, or by greed and fear?

I invite you today to have faith and hope, to do good, to trust your life and everything you do into God’s hands. You will see the big picture once you do it, and you will find true everlasting happiness.