

This is the second message of a three-part sermon series about finding happiness in a stressful world.

Two weeks ago, I told you I chose this message because I know most people in one way or another are trying to find happiness. I understand how challenging this is, particularly during this unprecedented time of worry about our health and economic wellness.

Here is a summation of what I said last Sunday to introduce us to today's second message: 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.

Now, I am not going to be naïve and suggest that finding happiness is an easy task because it is not. Happiness is not about the absence of suffering and problems or having everything we want.

Often, we are tempted to believe that "if we have a bigger house, more money in the bank or our physical looks are improved, then we truly will be happy." But that is not where happiness comes. There will never be a house big enough or enough money in our bank account, and we will never satisfy our vanity; instead, we will always think: I need more. The reason is that happiness does not come from stuff.

So, where is happiness then? How can we find happiness in a stressful and harsh world? It seems a rather elusive aspiration but is attainable if we have the right understanding about it and look for it in the right places.

The apostle Paul can teach us about this. He experienced lasting happiness and joy while enduring heavy trials. I am reading again from the same text as last week, 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 remember what we learned last week about the context of this letter.

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."

Paul was rejoicing because his imprisonment was encouraging others to preach the gospel of Jesus. For him, his happiness was coming from more people hearing and learning about Jesus.

The lesson we learned last week about Paul and his joy or happiness was that he was not looking at his life through the lens of his suffering (his imprisonment) but the lens of his faith. His perspective as a believer in Jesus and an apostle was the source of his happiness. For him, his priority was the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus, and, since that was taking place regardless of what was happening to him, he was happy.

Do you see what's happening here? By Paul looking at his life through the lens of faith, that rearranged his priorities, and his priorities arranged his life and how he engaged with the world, that is why he was joyful in harsh world.

Imagine Paul saying instead, "once I am free from this cell, I will rejoice." But that was never going to happen. He would have died miserably. Instead, we hear him saying "whether I am free or not, I know you are praying for me and the Spirit of God is with me, and the gospel is being preached, thus I rejoice." He says, "I have your prayers, God is with me, and more people are learning about Jesus, that's my happiness."

With this in mind, here is the critical question for us today: How does our faith direct our thoughts, feelings, and decisions? How does our faith inform and order our priorities? For Paul, as the apostle he was, his priority was the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Now, what are your priorities? This is so important for you to think about because your priorities will determine your happiness.

For example, here in America, many people share the belief that if they focus on making money, they will be happy and fulfilled once they have enough. It's the idea of "get rich, then do nothing." But this causes a myriad of issues. This approach in life leads to worry, selfishness, and even mental and physical ailments.

Furthermore, why do you think that here in the U.S., we have an epidemic political bickerness, violence, and over all discontent? The truth is that we don't seem to have the right information about how to live well, what real, lasting, and fulfilling happiness is about. We are chasing money and possessions, fame and power, pleasures, and instant gratification. We go after these things believing they will make us happy, but they don't.

I have discerned that the force behind this behavior is greed. Greed is a powerful foe. Greed keeps us from contentment and being grateful. Greed says, "If I have more, then I will be truly happy and will have reasons to be thankful." It says "you are almost there" but we never arrive.

Greed can't be satisfied. Therefore, greed tricks us into believing that we don't have enough yet to be happy.

Jesus speaks about this very powerfully in Matthew 16:26, where he said, "What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

Here, Jesus is teaching us that by trying to gain the whole world, we neglect our souls and end up forfeiting life itself.

The question is, "Why would anyone do that, that is, lose themselves in the pursuit of stuff?" Well, because of our desire to be happy, to live well. The issue is not wanting a good life but looking for it in places and things that don't have it. The reason this happens is that our priorities are misplaced due to greed. Our innate drive to find happiness and purpose leads us on this path, which is not inherently bad, but if this drive is directed by greed, we will lose ourselves every single time because everything we ever want will never be enough.

The sad part, as Jesus says, is that by the time we realize we invested our whole lives in this pursuit, we may have just wasted years that we will never get back, and we still end up empty-handed.

My friends, happiness is about pursuing life, not stuff or power. Jesus did not say, "I have come to give you stuff," or "so you can diminish your neighbor;" instead, he said, "I have come to give you life in abundance" (John 10:10).

This abundant life does not come from having everything. We can have everything yet be not fulfilled. We can have little yet become fully content. The abundance in life that Jesus speaks about is not measured by quantity but by quality. It is not about having more but having just precisely what we need.

Often, we tend to worry and work for the things that don't give us life at the expense of neglecting the actual sources of life: family, friends, faith. The very things that were giving joy to Paul: his friends praying for him, God being with him, and the teachings of Jesus being shared with many. The lens of faith arranged Paul's priorities, and that gave him joy despite all the wrongs done against him.

Now, it is your turn right now to think about this: What are your priorities? What are you pursuing? What gives you life?

I tell you what is for me: my faith in God, my family, fulfilling my calling as a pastor. This makes me happy. And, don't get me wrong, if I were to look at my life through the lens of suffering, I would be a sad, bitter, angry person, but I am not because not only do I look at life through the lens of faith but my faith arranges what matters to me most.

And I have that. I found my joy and have my happiness because I care about relationships: with God and everyone else. No evil or worry in this world can take away my happiness.

I finish with this, a question: What are your priorities right now? Are you guided by faith or by greed?

I invite you today to have faith, to trust your life and everything you are and do into God's hands. You will see the big picture once you do it, and your life and priorities will be rearranged, and you will find true everlasting happiness.

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