

1.

Christian Happiness

We all want to be happy, but we do not find it easy. The trouble is that we want to have everything this world offers, in the belief that this will make us happy. The apostle Paul had a quite different attitude. He wrote “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:11-12).

God is the only source of real happiness. He does not need anything or anyone to make him happy: even before he made the world, the three persons of the Trinity were completely happy with each other. What God does for Christians is to make them as happy as he is. This is necessary because they are not good enough or strong enough to make themselves happy. God gives them everything they need, as John wrote: “From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another” (John 1:16). So Christians can always be happy because even when they have very little of what this world offers, they have the spiritual blessings God gives us. In Christ they have everything they need.

This Christian happiness is sometimes called contentment. Paul wrote “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation” (1 Timothy 6:6-9). “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5).

The *first thing* we can say about this Christian happiness is that it comes from within. It is possible to give the impression that because we are not complaining we are happy with what God has given us, when deep down we are still grumbling. But God sees what we are really thinking. David wrote “Find rest, O my soul, in God alone” (Psalm 62:5), because he knew that this was the only way he could be really happy. Similarly, this trust in God, this happiness that comes from within Christians, affects every part of them. David knew that God is in control of everything; but he could still become depressed, because he had not let this truth really affect the way he was thinking. That was why he wrote “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” (Psalm 42:5). Like him, we have to set our hearts on the kind of happiness that starts from within and makes us completely happy, like the heat of the body being trapped by thermal clothing and keeping us completely warm. And just as we stay warm once we have got warm under our winter clothes, so Christian happiness is something that goes on and on.

Another thing we can say about Christian happiness is that it is still there even when tragedies occur. When they are in trouble, Christians sorrow just like other people. When others are in trouble, Christians are sorry with them. They pray for themselves and for those who suffer, and this is worth doing because the Lord Jesus, who suffered when he was tempted, “is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Though they pray to God, mature Christians who have problems do not grumble. When they are tempted to do so they control themselves. They do not complain about God, but go on obeying him and loving him. If they talk about their problems, they do so in prayer, because they still believe that God can help them.

A third important aspect of Christian happiness is the fact that it is the work of God. It is not the result of a naturally happy temperament, nor of a refusal to get involved with what is going on around them. Even non-Christians pull themselves together like that, and try not to worry. But Christian happiness is much more than “trying not to worry”: it also has a positive element. The Christian wants to be happy all the time because that will glorify God.

So *a fourth thing* we can say about Christian happiness is that what makes a Christian really happy is doing what God wants. Christians are not forced to obey God. They do so willingly, and find that that makes them happy. When they stop to think, they realise that nothing makes them happy so much as submitting to God's will. They are content to let God plan for the future, even if his plans are quite different from what they intended. In fact, they prefer his plans to their own, because they know that he knows what is good for them better than they do. After all, he understands them better than they understand themselves! Non-Christians, who believe their fate is in their own hands, can only fear for the future, because one mistake could lead to disaster, whereas Christians have nothing to fear: they can commit the future to God, and then take pleasure in letting him guide them. Solomon wrote "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5,6). Knowing that God is in control makes Christians happy both while they are experiencing trouble, and also afterwards, when they look back and see how God led them.

What is more, this Christian happiness lasts whatever kind of trouble is suffered. Christians do not have the right to decide what kind of suffering they will experience; to say, for example, that they are prepared to lose their possessions but not their health. They are happy whatever sort of suffering comes along. Perhaps one kind of suffering follows another, until their whole life seems to be made up of problems; but deep down they are still truly happy. Perhaps there seems to be no end in sight of their problems; but still, deep down, they are happy. And God, who has planned out their whole life for them, is glorified by that.