

Be Happy and Thankful: Cheerfulness Is a Duty

I. Worldly Religion Is an Unhappy Thing.

Someone recently forwarded an essay to me with the following statement by the man most responsible for overthrowing the West's last successful, but short-lived attempt at Westernizing an Islamic nation, Iran: "Allah did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer. An Islamic regime must be serious in every field. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious" (The Ayatollah Khomeini).

It struck me how much at odds this Shiite political leader's perspective on life is with the whole of Scripture, from the Law of Moses to the book of Revelation, where the consummation of history is marked by eternal joy in those who know the Lord Jesus: "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

Indeed, this dour, serious, unhappy, cheerless approach to life is quite contrary to Scripture. The Law of Moses gave a serious warning about the failure to serve the Lord with a cheerful heart: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God **with joy and gladness of heart**, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you" (Deuteronomy 28:47, 48).

And Saint Paul informs us that the failure openly to express gratitude to God calls down his wrath on humankind: "For the **wrath of God** is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, **although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful**, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Romans 1:18-21).

II. Choosing to Praise God and to Maintain a Cheerful Attitude is a Fundamental Duty.

Saint Paul commands us: "**Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!**" (Philippians 4:4)

Indeed, the dominant motif in biblical worship is not being dour and gloomy, but exuberant and noticeably celebratory: "Make a **joyful shout** to the Lord, all you lands! Serve the Lord with **gladness**; Come before His presence with singing" (Psalm 100:1, 2).

III. Why Should We Give Thanks?

And in the concluding exhortations of his first letter, he sandwiches in this command:

“**Rejoice always**, pray without ceasing, **in everything give thanks**; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

A. This is God’s will; it is his command (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

B. It is not rooted in our worldly circumstances, but in the Providence of God

1. Worldly Circumstances

Esther 5:9-13, So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh. 11 Then Haman told them of **his great riches, the multitude of his children, everything in which the king had promoted him**, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king. 12 Moreover Haman said, “Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king. 13 Yet **all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew** sitting at the king’s gate.”

2. God’s Providence: If God be for us... Romans 8:28-39.

C. Maintaining a Cheerful Spirit is a Gospel Response.

We see that in one of Paul’s last letters:

Philippians 1:18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, **Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.**

Philippians 2:16-18 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. Yes, and **if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.** For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

Christian joy and Christian happiness transcend this veil of tears and differ radically from the joy and happiness of worldly people. Saint James speaks of worldly joy: “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and **your joy (CHARA) to gloom**” (James 4:9).

“Happy” is a word that the best lexicographers use to translate the Greek word, *MAKARIOS*: “1. pert. **to being fortunate or happy** because of circumstances, fortunate, happy. . . 2. pert. to being esp. favored, blessed, fortunate, happy, privileged, fr. a transcendent perspective . . . a. of humans privileged recipient of divine favor b. of things or experiences blessed” [Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*. Third edition (BDAG) (based on Walter Bauer’s *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, sixth edit. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 2000.), pp. 610, 611.].

Godly joy and godly happiness essentially refer to the same thing, and the Lord Jesus spells out how we may obtain such happiness in Matthew 5:3-12, the Beatitudes (so named from the Latin word, *BEATUS*, which translates the Greek word, *MAKARIOS*). Keeping in mind that Christian joy and happiness have a different root than the fleeting emotions of worldly people, it can be helpful to read the Beatitudes with the ordinary meaning of *BEATUS* and *MAKARIOS* in mind:

Happy are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:3).

Happy are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted (5:4).

Happy are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth (5:5).

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled (5:6).

Happy are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy (5:7).

Happy are the pure in heart, For they shall see God (5:8).

Happy are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God (5:9).

Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:10).

Happy are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice (*CHAIRO*, the verbal form of *CHARA*) and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (5:11, 12).

Godly happiness is a great help in life, so wrote the great preacher and medical doctor of the mid-twentieth century, Martin Lloyd-Jones:

All moments of unhappiness in life are ultimately due to a person's experience of separation from God. A person who is in real communion with God and with the Lord Jesus Christ is happy. It does not matter whether he is in a dungeon, or whether he has his feet fast in the stocks, or whether he is burning at the stake; he is still happy if he is in communion with God. Is not that the experience of the saints down the centuries? So the ultimate cause of any misery or lack of joy is separation from God, and the one cause of separation from Him is self. And self always means defiance of God; it always means that I put myself on the throne instead of God, and therefore it is always something that separates me from Him. Whenever we are unhappy it means that some way or other we are looking at ourselves and thinking about ourselves, instead of communing with God [D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, M. D., *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Volume One, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 295-296].

IV. What Is the Practical Fruit of Maintaining this Cheerful Spirit and Choosing Daily to Give Thanks Regardless of our Visible Circumstances?

When people choose to rejoice in spite of the circumstances around them, they experience an inner renewal that enables them to do what they need to do: "Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for **the joy of the Lord is your strength**" (Nehemiah 8:10).