

Sadness vs. Happiness vs. Joy

By Jason Huff

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Lamentations 3:17-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; John 16:19-24

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from John 16:19-24. Listen now to God's holy, perfect, and inerrant Word. "Jesus saw that the disciples wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."

Does God want us to be happy? Depends on who you listen to. In researching my sermon for this week, I found many people who said that God commands us to be happy. (And as we all know, not following a direct command from God is a sin, right?) At the same time, I found people saying that God is far more concerned about you being holy rather than happy, and that chasing after happiness is also ungodly. Just a mess of contradictions. It goes to prove that you should be careful when you trust the Internet, since I also found a book titled, "God Wants You To Be Rich." I think the author's idea was that God would make him rich when anyone gets suckered into buying his book!

But it really is a valid question we're asking...does God want us to be happy? So much of our evangelical church subculture suggests that an unhappy Christian is something less than God intended. We get the sense that a sad or depressed Christian is a contradiction in terms. Our Christian music stations all call themselves "positive and encouraging," no matter who owns them or what particular music they play. Does that make other stations "negative and discouraging?" I don't know. But what I do know is that we aren't sure what it means to be sad, and we want people to stop being sad as quickly as possible. It's weird that both the world and the church want this, and I don't think that's biblical. We are starving for biblical theology about sadness and happiness and joy, and Jesus gives us a lot of answers in this area.

Today's passage comes to us from Jesus' dinner with the disciples on Maundy Thursday, the day before He was crucified. John's gospel records much of what was said in what has become known as the Upper Room Discourse – the last things Jesus taught His disciples in an upper room as they celebrated the Passover together. Everything has been leading up to this moment. And the disciples are starting to get the picture of what is about to happen. Several times, Jesus predicted His death in Jerusalem to the disciples. The disciples had been exceedingly sorrowful about this, according to Matthew 17. In the upper room, Jesus talks to them about going away and coming back, and frankly, it's easy to understand why they were misunderstanding Him. It's only plain in retrospect, after Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus warns them that this is their time of grief. He doesn't warn them again; He just predicts it. When Jesus dies on the cross, it is absolutely going to cause them the greatest heartache they've ever known. They'll lose their teacher, their companion, their friend, their Lord. All will appear lost. Even though Jesus has told them every time that He will rise from the dead, He doesn't say, "Don't grieve; I'll be back soon." His loss is so terrible that grief and sadness is the natural reaction.

But Jesus also gives them hope. Their grief will turn to joy. Once they see Him again, once they know the promises are true and they see His resurrected body and have the proof that He is the messiah, no one will take away their joy. In fact, once that happens, Jesus says, the Father will lavish gifts on the disciples so they can continue the work – their joy will be complete because they will be able to work in the power and strength of Jesus to tell the world that the Savior has come.

Sorrow and joy are interrelated; they are not enemies. Both are biblical, as we'll see in a moment. What we really need to deal with first is the question of happiness. What is happiness, and why is happiness in the most modern sense unbiblical? We have to be careful, because the definition of happiness has changed over the course of time. Some translations of the Bible translated the word "blessed," meaning blessed by the Lord, as "happiness." Many definitions of the word "happiness" are OK. Being happy is sometimes OK, in certain ways OK. But sometimes it's not, and that's what we have to discuss.

The root of the English word "happiness" is from the old Norse and old English meaning luck or good fortune. Think about many words with that root "hap" in them – happenstance, haphazard, perhaps. Happiness is an intense emotion of satisfaction, bliss, and pleasure. The world is going your way. Everything *feels* just right. To be happy means that things are going awesomely in the moment.

But there are two problems with happiness. The first problem with happiness is that it is based solely on feelings. I want to *feel* happy. Because happiness is purely emotional, it can start to drive out our passion for following God. You look at many of the moral failures of biblical figures in the Bible, sometimes very moral people full of integrity, and it's usually because they choose the pleasure of the moment over godliness.

Most of the moral decay in our culture is due to the church's willingness to go along with this, to want to see people happy. Someone wants a divorce because their husband or wife just isn't making them happy any more and someone else does? OK. You want to be with whomever you want, of whatever gender you want, because it makes you happy? OK. Our church services are often more about a show that makes people happy than worship that pleases our God. Churches have often bought into the lie that we need to be happy. But God is not worried about our immediate emotions. He wants us to be right with Him, in a state of grace with Him, not just happy.

The other issue with happiness is that it is fleeting. I got tickets to a movie I've been waiting to see for months. Yay! The movie was terrible. Boo! I got a new guitar that sounds like a dream. Yay! A year later, there's a better one I'm dreaming of and I'm planning to sell the old one. Boo! New car, new RV, new anything. Yay! Six months later, boo!

Happiness can never sustain us because it's fleeting. Because it's based on circumstances, it's only as stable as our circumstances are. Some people are more even-tempered than others; some people aren't as affected by circumstances as others are. Some people don't let their emotions show as much as others. But all of us know that our happiness level can change in an instant. And how many times is our happiness changed by first world problems? We can be upset because our wi-fi is down or our favorite restaurant is out of our favorite salad dressing. We can lose our happiness over trivial matters. Happiness is a dangerous thing to base our lives around.

So what about grief? Grief is actually biblical. Grief and sadness are the logical outcome of living in a fallen and broken world. And the Bible is full of the grief of God's people. The psalms are full of the cries of God's people who feel abandoned, burdened, hurt, wounded, trapped, and devoured by their enemies. The book of Job is the story of a man processing the grief of his immense losses against the backdrop of friends who just don't understand and think that it's all his fault. Ecclesiastes 7:3 says, "Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart."

One book of the Bible, Lamentations, is by its very name a book of grief, the book that records the heartbreak when the people of Israel are exiled to Babylon. The book of Lamentations includes the goodness of God – we heard that in our reading this morning – but it includes little if no hope that God will restore them after all the sins they've committed. And over and over, we see that the proper response to sin in our lives is grief – grief that we've offended our righteous God, grief at the separation between us it has caused, and grief over the sacrifice necessary to bring us back into right relationship with Him.

Our Savior Jesus, God in the flesh, is no stranger to sadness. Isaiah 53, in predicting Jesus' death, says He is a man of sorrows well acquainted with grief. He weeps over the death of Lazarus, a man He will bring back from the grave, because He knows the great sorrow that death brings in our separation from one another. As He enters Jerusalem, Jesus says His soul is greatly distressed. He is mournful on Gethsemane as He awaits His betrayal. He agonizes over Jerusalem and the city's unwillingness to turn back to God, which will be her downfall. Jesus is a passionate, emotional man, and He experiences deep grief.

Sometimes we think that because Jesus has risen from the dead, because we have hope, sadness should be far from us, that we shouldn't feel sad because of this rich and abundant faith we have. But that's not the case either. Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica that has had real problems understanding what it means that Jesus hasn't returned yet and many in their church have died. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul writes, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind that has no hope."

Note two things: first, our grief is different. We have hope in Jesus. When we grieve, we do not believe that the person has become nothing, that they are gone and we will never see them again. They are in the presence of God now, and at the resurrection they will be given new spiritual bodies along with all who believe. It is as if they have gone on a very long journey, and we will not hear from them again for a great long while, but they are not lost to us forever.

But second, that we do not grieve as the world grieves means we still grieve. We still acknowledge the pain of our loss. We allow ourselves to cry, to feel the pain, to recognize that we have lost something real, important, and personal. What I've learned is that most of the sinful addictions we face, from overeating to alcoholism to gambling and worse, come from traumas in our lives that we have not faced and mourned and appropriately grieved.

Grief and sadness are not wrong. If we need to grieve, if that process brings us healing, then we must go through it. Revelation 21 promises us that at the coming of the new heaven and new earth, God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." When God is our comforter, when we find relief from our sadness in God, we are truly healed in the process, and we can move on to comfort others and help them in their grief.

But now we move on to the good stuff: joy. Joy is what Jesus promised the disciples after their grief, and He said that joy could not be taken away. Joy is what a mother experiences after the birth of her child – she doesn't care about all the pain because her baby is here. And you know, that extends for a lot longer than that. What is it as parents of a newborn that gets us through endless sleepless nights and nasty diaper changes and crazy crying fits? Joy. Joy sees us through all the terrible stuff because of that deep rooted sense of peace and fulfillment.

That's what we really need to understand: joy. Joy is happiness down deep. Joy is not based in our emotions, and it can't be taken away by circumstances. Joy is knowing the security and peace that only God can give. Joy comes from knowing that you are safe in Jesus, that God loves you, that despite every earthly circumstance, you are God's child being prepared for an eternity in His Kingdom.

Joy allows us to act hopeful when everything is going wrong. Joy gives us the strength to get through incredibly difficult and unfortunate circumstances. Joy gives us the wisdom to see things as they truly are. Joy is why Paul could write about all the things he went through being "light and momentary troubles" - because he knew they were producing for us an eternal glory that outweighs them all.

The Bible doesn't command happiness, but it does command joy. That's why Paul could write to the church in Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always – again I say, rejoice!" Jesus said, "Don't rejoice because the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Peter told the church, "Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed."

So how do we reconcile the joy we are commanded to have and the sorrow we often feel? We live honestly. In Romans 12:15, Paul says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice. Grieve with those who grieve.” There will always be brokenness in our world so bad we must cry over it. It would not only be unnatural not to grieve over it, but dangerous to our spiritual well-being. When things are worth lamenting, we lament together. But we also rejoice because Jesus has conquered the world. When things are great, we rejoice. When things are hard, we rejoice. Because God is in it all.

Perhaps the thing to remember is that God’s people are not called to earthly happiness, to an emotional state that’s one constant “yahoo!,” but we are also those who have overcome the world. In one sense of the word, the old sense that some older biblical translations used, to be blessed by God is to be happy – not in the happiness of the world, but the joy of knowing God has reached out His hand and taken hold of us and will not let us go.

What we should watch out for is being gloomy or mopey Christians because of momentary external circumstances. Now I’m not talking about the medical condition known as depression, where you can’t feel joy even when you’re a believer and even when circumstances are bright. That’s something that counseling and treatment can overcome. I’m talking about Christians who are easily buffeted by the waves of happenstance. The book of James deals with this pretty harshly. James argues in chapter 4 of his letter that many of our worst moments come from friendship with the world – we quarrel and fight, we covet, we don’t ask God, because we want what we want rather than what God wants.

We are the joy people. We are people who go beyond the superficiality of happiness to something deeper. We like it when we’re happy, of course, there’s nothing wrong with it, but we do not pursue happiness when it conflicts with the joy of the Lord. We want joy, that deep, lasting, unshakable sense of peace and well-being that comes from being in right relationship with the Lord. It is not that God wants you to be holy *more* than He wants you to be happy. It’s that God created us so that the only way we could be fully and completely filled with joy and true, good, pure happiness is to *be* holy....to pursue being more like him.

Profoundly Christian author C.S. Lewis had something funny and important things to say about happiness and sorrow and joy, and I’m going to leave us with some of those thoughts today. Here’s what he said about religion and happiness - “I sometimes wonder if all pleasures are not substitutes for joy...I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity...God can’t give us peace and happiness apart from Himself because it is not there; there is no such thing...Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Friends, may we grieve the world as it is and the losses we endure. May we move forward in faith as God shows us Himself. And may we rejoice as the people who know that God is for us, God is with us, and He will be both now and forevermore.