

GOD'S PLAN FOR HAPPINESS

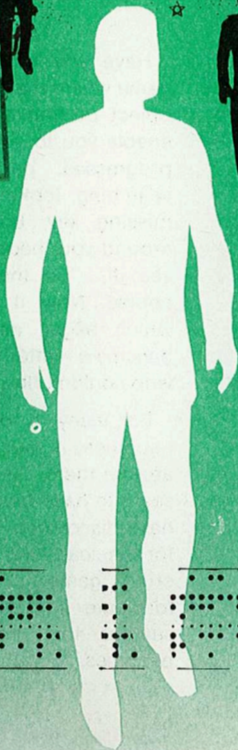
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GOD'S PLAN FOR HAPPINESS

Have you ever participated in a parlour game where the object was to locate a hidden object or find an obscure clue that would enable you to solve a mystery? As the game progressed, perhaps you found yourself searching, looking, straining to discover the missing key, but it remained hidden. All around you, people were exclaiming, "Now I see it!" "So that's what it was!" Well, of course. Now it makes sense." The game which began as an amusement gradually became a matter of serious business to those who couldn't find the key.

For many in today's world, the search for happiness is much like that parlour game. All around them, they see men and women who seem to have found something, who seem to have discovered the key to enjoying life. But for the searching person, life appears to be a cruel game of insiders and outsiders, fortunate and unfortunate. The more they search, the more obscure the mystery becomes.

What is the hidden key? What makes people happy? Psychologist Jonathan Freedman surveyed nearly 100,000 people over a three year period, and still didn't find the answer. He determined that for single men and women, "friends and social life" are the most important ingredients in being happy. For married persons, personal growth, marriage, and being in love were most frequently given as factors in personal happiness.

Yet, Freedman acknowledges that none of these factors is either necessary in order to be happy or sufficient to bring happiness. He says you can have all of them and still be miserable. After all his research, Freedman had no solid answers, only theories. One of his conclusions was: "Happiness depends on something more complex than a combination of ingredients."

That's a challenging thought when you consider that the ingredients themselves have captured our attention in the twentieth century. From Sydney to Paris, we are jogging our way to health, working our way to wealth, and relaxing our way to the "good life" of pleasure and satisfaction.

Bookstores are filled with popular works telling us how to pull our own strings, and look out for number one. Happiness, they tell us, comes when we get a grip on our own lives, plan our own destinies, and make things happen. A publisher recently remarked that he could not imagine the best seller list without at least one self-improvement book among the top ten non-fiction titles.

For many, happiness is ownership. In 1977, for the first time in a single year, more than \$1 billion dollars was spent in Australia on advertising. The messages coming through radio, television, print, and outdoor ads say, "Buy this! You need it in order to be happy." Whether obvious or subtle, the promise of a better life is inherent in every advertisement.

For others, the road to happiness leads, not through self-discipline, but through self-indulgence. This is what essayist Thomas Wolfe has called "The ME generation". This generation has been raised on the promise of "instant ecstasy". A pleasure-centred, affluent society has offered immediate fulfilment through sex, drugs, or things. The credo of many today is, "If it feels good, do it".

If any or all of these roads lead to happiness, then what's the problem? The Bible reminds us that: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death". (Proverbs 14:12) Happiness is not simply a matter of improving my lot and surrounding myself with pleasure today. In order to be genuine, today's happiness must not result in tomorrow's disappointment.

Something has gone wrong in modern man's quest for the elusive secret of happiness. A university professor calls his students "the grim generation". An American youth takes his life and leaves a note saying, "I'm tired of being so damn happy". Actress Faye Dunaway tells an interviewer, "From childhood I had been caught up in the American dream. It tells you to aim for a success that's going to make up for everything

... then suddenly there I was, at Lincoln Center, working with Kazan, Jason Robards, and a dozen other actors I respected. That was success. Why wasn't I happy?" College President William Banowsky notes, "We overeat, oversex, overplay. Why do we remain empty, insecure, and bored?"

For many years in Australia, there has been a regular Sunday newspaper feature entitled, "Roads To Avoid", which describes some undesirable routes around the country. Some people see the Bible in that same light. On your quest for happiness, it can warn you about many roads that go nowhere. But much more than that, it tells about a marvellous alternative to the dead-end roads of life.

Jesus Christ offers Himself as that alternative. He says to modern man — to you and me — "If you're prepared to rethink your priorities, to change your mind, and take another road, then I'll let you in on the secret of happiness."

One day, Jesus gathered around him an intimate group of his men and in a series of short, graphic statements, explained to them the secret of happiness.

"Happy," said Jesus, "are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

"Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

"Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

"Happy are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

"Happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

"Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

"Happy are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

These short exclamations of Jesus have become famous as the "Beatitudes" And that's exactly what they are, the Be-Attitudes. They tell us that happiness is to be found, not in the sensual and selfish, but in changed attitudes toward life, toward God, and toward others.

Rather than just another list of rules for self-improvement, the Be-Attitudes are Christ's picture of His people. They describe the character of the citizens of God's kingdom, His sons and daughters through faith in Christ. They tell us what it's like to be a Christian.

Nowhere is the contrast between Jesus' people and the people of the world more clear. The values of the world and the values of Jesus are in collision. The world says that happiness is a goal to be pursued. Jesus says that happiness is a by-product, the result of a right relation to God and others. A child who chases his shadow never catches it. But, if he turns to follow the sun, his shadow follows him. "Stop following unreal shadows," says Jesus. "Start following God's Son, His truth!

Forget about happiness and happiness will follow you!"

The world says that happiness is always one step in the future. "If I only had then I'd be happy." Go to that game. Make that sale. Take that holiday. Buy that dress. Own that car. Win that championship. Finish university. Marry that man. Then you will find happiness.

Jesus says that happiness IS! It begins right now, when God's forgiveness and life flood into your soul. The beatitudes are not pious hopes of what will be, they are congratulations on what is! "Happy ARE the poor in spirit. Happy ARE the mourners, the meek, the merciful In heaven? Yes, certainly. But also, NOW!

The world says happiness is when your circumstances are all you want them to be. When they're right, you're happy. When they're wrong, you're unhappy. No! says Jesus. True happiness is deeper than that. The very word "happiness" that Jesus used in the beatitudes is interesting. It is the Greek word "Makarios". In Jesus' day, people used it to describe the island of Cyprus. "Makarios," they called it. "The Happy Island." Cyprus was known to be so luxuriant, its weather so perfect, its natural resources so rich, that you would never need to leave it for anything. It contained all that was necessary for the good and happy life. So Jesus' joy has its secret within a person. Circumstances can't rob the Christian of his joy! "Your joy no man takes from you," said

Jesus. (John 16:22) Nothing in life or death can destroy it.

Between the happiness of the world and the joy of Jesus, there is a radical difference.

The world says: "Happy is the self-sufficient person." Jesus says, "Happy are the poor in spirit." Happiness is taking off the mask that says, "I'm all right, I don't need anything," and learning to say, "God I need you. I open myself to you. I need your forgiveness."

The world says: "Happy are the carefree." Jesus says, "Happy are those who mourn." Happiness is feeling the hurt and sin in my life and the world so deeply that I learn to cry again — and then to laugh with delight because of God's remedy!

The world says: "Happy are the brash." Jesus says, "Happy are the meek." But don't equate meekness with weakness. The word "meek" has in it the picture of a proud, high-spirited horse which has been trained to obey its rider's commands. Meek means disciplined, God-controlled. It speaks of those who have made God's will their will, and in doing so have discovered that everything is theirs when the real God runs their lives.

The world says: "Happy are those who get revenge." Jesus says, "Happy are the merciful." Happiness is being able to say, "It's all right. God forgave me, so I forgive you." When that happens, we feel the plug pulled and the bitterness begins to drain out of our lives.

The world says: "Happy are the schemers, the devious." Jesus says, "Happy are the pure in heart." Happiness involves getting the pollution cleared out of my life and having a clear channel opened up for God's love to come pouring through.

The world says: "Happy are those who always insist on their rights." Jesus says, "Happy are the peacemakers." Happiness is the exquisite joy (not without pain) of knowing God has used you to set a broken relationship right.

The world says: "Happy are the popular." Jesus says, "Happy are those who are persecuted for me." People may misunderstand your change of heart, even call you a religious freak. Following Christ has never been easy, but He tells us that even in the midst of persecution, He is with us, caring for us.

What we have here is nothing less than two different lifestyles, two different sets of values, two radical perspectives on reality. The gulf between them is as wide as that between heaven and hell. The choice is between ultimate joy and ultimate despair.

Who is this person who presents us with so radical a consideration of happiness and calls us to this crucial choice? Writer H. S. Vigeveno has noted: "He never fought a war or took up arms. He never squabbled over property or drove a hard bargain. But He inherits the earth, this Man who died on a cross! He never talked politics with the politicians, economics with the economists, real

estate with the businessmen, and yet He is served and loved by millions today. His birth-day, death, and resurrection are celebrated all over the world. He has inherited the earth already!"

During a recent visit to Sydney, Susan Train, Vogue Magazine's fashion editor in Paris, described Australia in these words: "It is an extraordinary and wonderfully wide-open land of infinite potential and future possibilities. There is no need to be bogged down in historical precedent, no need to make the same mistakes as the rest of the world."

The well-being of a nation or an individual is closely tied to the concept of avoiding the mistakes of others, yet how seldom we see it happen. We walk the paths of today, searching for happiness, unmindful of the signposts of history. Standing as the greatest marker of all time, the Cross of Jesus Christ divides the centuries and challenges us to strike out in a new direction.

Happiness can start for you with a new kind of honesty with God. Happiness is coming to God, admitting to Him that you've tried to pull your own strings, run your own life, and you've failed. Get it all out before Him, the bitterness, the disappointment, the hurt. As you do, you can find the forgiveness that Jesus died to give you. His Spirit will come into your life, clean it up inside, and set you free. You'll find the assurance that you belong to your Heavenly Father, no matter what happens, now and forever.


"Happy is the people whose God is the Lord!"

Happiness is in Jesus Christ ... for you ... right now! Trust Him as your Saviour and Lord and you'll discover with the Psalmist that: "When we obey Him, every path He guides us on is fragrant with His lovingkindness and His truth."

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