

## The Quest For Happiness

**Happy are the people whose God is Lord**  
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I hope that you had a very enjoyable and happy Thanksgiving on Thursday. We certainly did. In fact, there was quite a bit of excitement, which was even more enjoyable. It is interesting to watch children. We had seven or more small children, and there was happiness written all over their faces. We sat down for the Thanksgiving meal, after the prayer, and they were just gleeful and glad and so happy to be there. In fact, the excitement at their table got to be so much that it caused a stir. On the faces, you saw the happiness written, and then you saw astonishment, and then, fear. I will explain what happened.

As we sat down and they sat down, they looked at the candle on their table and thought, "Hmm." The candle with the flame at the top looked like a good place to put a napkin. One of them held a napkin over that flame, and it flamed. The happiness on their faces went to fear and then confusion. Of course, there was a lot of scrambling from the adults around. Before you knew it, the table was on fire (the tablecloth was plastic), and the flames were about a foot off the table. The children were confused as to whether to be happy and excited or scared to death. That is the way it is with children. They can go from happy to scared to unhappy or whatever in just the blink of an eye. Needless to say, the flames were put out eventually, and the children were reprimanded, so they were no longer happy. Everything was wonderful; the food was good; and we all had a very enjoyable time.

I mention their happiness and their unhappiness in such short spurts because is that not the way adults are, except that we are a little more mature than those small children? Instead of switching in a matter of seconds from happy to unhappy, we take a little bit longer.

Sadly, many people did not enjoy Thanksgiving. There are many reasons why. It could have been the economic problems or personal crises in their homes. What would be the real reason they did not have true happiness?

Are we not given the right to pursue happiness here in the United States? The Declaration of Independence of the United States adopted on July 4, 1776, states,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed— That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

This official resolution should make it easier for us to pursue happiness than any other peoples on earth. This document says that we are guaranteed the opportunity to pursue those things that we personally think will make us happy. However, you and I know, as King Solomon puts it,

**Proverbs 14:12-14** There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief. The backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways, but a good man will be satisfied from above.

The great story of civilization, the history of the human race is, in a sense, nothing but the story of the endeavors of men and women to solve their problems. Nobody has ever wanted to be miserable. People have always sought happiness. They have done everything possible to find it. The inventiveness and genius of the human race have almost been exhausted in this effort to find peace, rest, happiness, joy, and gladness. It is the quest for the quiet heart. It is the quest for contentment.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, it is evident that the quest has not led to a successful outcome. People of the world are still searching and asking, "How can we find happiness?" The answer is still eluding them.

Psalms 90 is "a prayer of Moses"; that makes it the oldest of the 150 psalms. In his prayer, Moses contrasts God's eternity with human temporariness and acknowledges that man's days pass away in God's wrath. He prayed that the compassionate God would give the Israelites success for their labors and joy for their sorrows. Because life is so brief and because it is spent under God's wrath on sin, Moses, as leader of the Israelites, implored God for wisdom in numbering their days. What he meant by that is realizing how few they are and how to make the best of the days that we have.

**Psalms 90:7-14** For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified. You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; we finish our years like a sigh. The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days!

There is a way, a solution to find happiness every day. In verse 14, Moses may have been referring to the manna that fell each morning, six days a week, and met the physical needs of the Israelites. It is a picture of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, who meets our spiritual needs.

**Deuteronomy 8:3** So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

The manna sustained life for the Israelites for forty years, but Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, gives life to the whole world for all eternity! Physical bread alone does not make one happy—although some people seem to get quite a lot of enjoyment out of pastries and things similar to bread.

**Matthew 4:4** "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

We have to live by every word of God if we are going to successfully walk through the day and enjoy His blessings. The nourishment of the Word enables us to be faithful seekers and devoted learners. It provides us with the knowledge of God that reveals true happiness.

**Psalm 90:14-15** Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days! Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, the years in which we have seen evil.

To those of you who are young: What if you wait until you are older to have a deep relationship with God? Will you look back one day and think, "I have wasted my life. I cannot bring back the past and redo any of it. I have lost the opportunities of my earlier years." Those of you who are young, take it from all of us who are older: you will eventually say that, especially when you hit middle age and you have your midlife crisis. Young men and women, beware lest you lose your lives to inaction and wastefulness. True, you may come to your senses and mature eventually and seek God in your later years, but the precious hours that are wasted now, without any serious purpose, are wasted forever.

There is another principle to learn from this: In order for a person to rejoice and be glad all his days, he must learn early, in whatever state he is, to be content. A discontented person is, of course, an unhappy person. He is an unthankful person. It is impossible for an unconverted person to be anything else than discontented. While the heart and mind of a person is empty, it cannot but feel uneasy, dissatisfied, and discontented. However, it is much different for the one who is satisfied early with God's mercy, because he has much more happiness in his life.

There is also an application of this to the beginning of each day. To be satisfied with God's mercy every day of our lives, we must start the day with prayer. We must start every day in conversation with and devotion to our God and Father. We have to ask Him to guide the work of our hands.

**Psalm 90:16-17** Let Your work appear to Your servants, and Your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands.

Life certainly is a difficult school, and God disciplines us if we fail to learn our lessons and submit to His will, but there is more to the story. In spite of the "black border" around this psalm, the emphasis is on life, not death. He is trying to help us to have a good and happy life.

The past and present experiences of life prepare us for the future, and all of life prepares us for eternity. When we contrast verses 13-17 with verses 7-12, we can see the difference. Moses' closing prayer emphasizes God's compassion and unfailing love, His desire to give us joy and satisfaction even in the midst of life's troubles, and His ability to make life count for eternity.

The future looks positive when Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Christ suffered greatly, but out of it comes great joy and gladness. There are compensations in life that we may not fully appreciate until we enter God's Kingdom.

Moses prayed that God would give him and his people as much joy in the future as the sorrow that they had experienced in the past. Our suffering today cannot even compare to our rejoicing in God's Kingdom. God promises to give us far more happiness, joy, and gladness in His Kingdom than we could ever imagine in the suffering that we have had in this life.

The apostle Paul may have had this in mind when he told the Romans, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." To the Corinthians, he wrote, "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ." God promises His children far more blessings than the burdens we carry! The glory to come far exceeds the suffering that we bear today. Moses lost his temper and could not enter Canaan, but he will be in the Kingdom with Jesus Christ and share God's glory with Elijah and the disciples, thanks to God's mercy.

Whatever God does not compensate for here on earth will be compensated in the Kingdom, and this includes our works for Him. At times, Moses must have felt that his work was futile, temporary, and not worth doing. He was frustrated with the carnality of the Israelites, but he pushed on and he kept on to the end, to finish the job that God had for him. Many times, the people broke his heart and grieved his spirit. He sacrificed to serve them, and they rarely appreciated him, at least not until he had died. No work done for God will ever go unrewarded, though, and those who do the will of God abide forever.

The favor of God does not desert us in our old age, in times of affliction, or when we are about to die; and the blessings of our work and witness will go on. In verse 13, Moses addressed God as the God of the covenant, who will never break His promises, and that is the God we love, worship, and serve today.

Because life is brief, Moses prayed, "Teach us." Because life is difficult, he prayed, "Satisfy us." Because his work at times seemed futile, he prayed, "Establish the work of our hands." God answered those prayers for Moses, and He will answer them for us.

In the Old Testament, "happiness" is a direct result of honoring and keeping the covenant made with Abraham. The covenant blessings of the Law are simply the outworking of these promises. Thus, under the old covenant, happiness was a sign of God's covenant favor and the proof that God keeps his promises.

For the nation of Israel, under the monarchy, happiness was directly connected to the covenant faithfulness of the king. When the king kept the covenant, the people were blessed. Under the wise rule of Solomon, I Kings 4:20 records that, "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy." Even the Queen of Sheba acknowledged to King Solomon, as recorded in I Kings 10:8, "How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!"

It is significant that not once after the death of Solomon do the books of Kings record anyone's being happy. People were happy under a wise king, but unhappy under the rule of foolish ones. This is one of the reasons people are in an unhappy condition today. The result of the decisions made by unrighteous, unwise leadership negatively impacts the common people.

King David never engaged in war just for the sake of conquest. His goal was to defend the land so the people could live peaceful, happy, and profitable lives. The people of Israel were God's people, and they had a work to accomplish on the earth. Therefore, they had to have children, the necessities of life, and peace in the land.

In any day and age, there is only one way to be happy: for God to be the Lord.

**Psalm 144:7-11** Stretch out Your hand from above; rescue me and deliver me out of great waters, from the hand of foreigners, whose mouth speaks vain words, and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood. I will sing a new song to You, O God; on a harp of ten strings I will sing praises to You, the One who gives salvation to kings, Who delivers David His servant from the deadly sword. Rescue me and deliver me from the hand of foreigners, whose mouth speaks lying words, and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood?

This is something that we have to be praying today, that we, as a nation as well as individually, are delivered out of the hand of the foreigners, strangers, and those who would do harm against God's church.

All of the blessings mentioned in verses 12-15 were promised to them in God's covenant if the people and their rulers obeyed the laws of the Lord. David mentioned the home and family first, for, as goes the home, so goes the nation. He compared the sons to strong growing plants and the daughters to beautiful graceful statues that could support buildings. This gives an image of strength in the land. Then he moved to the produce and animals and to bountiful crops and multiplying flocks and herds. Once again, these physical blessings are all mentioned in God's covenant.

**Psalm 144:12-15** That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as pillars, sculptured in palace style; that our barns may be full, supplying all kinds of produce; that our sheep may bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields; that our oxen may be well-laden; that there be no breaking in or going out; that there be no outcry in our streets. Happy are the people who are in such a state; happy are the people whose God is the LORD!

No matter what man tries to be happy about or bring on happiness by doing, this is the only sure way to have true and lasting happiness.

In His covenant with Israel, God promised them victory over the enemy and peace, prosperity, and a happy life. Sadly, the nation rebelled against God and lost all of those blessings in their Babylonian captivity. They lost these blessings because they became unthankful, discontented, and disobedient, forgetting God as their Master.

"How blessed [and happy] are the people whose God is the Lord!" because He cares for us personally, delivers us victoriously, and blesses us bountifully. "Happy are the people who are in such a state; happy are the people whose God is the Lord!"

In comparison with the Old Testament, the New Covenant believer is still happy under the shade of a vine—but now the vine is Christ Himself. The branches are the individual members of the church, who receive happiness under the shade of God's church through Christ. Under the Old Covenant, happiness was primarily in terms of circumstantial well-being. Under the New Covenant, happiness is centered on Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul told the Philippian members, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

In the New Testament, happiness has a moral aspect. We are not only to use it for our own benefit but also as an opportunity of thanksgiving. The apostle James writes in James 5:13, "Is anyone

cheerful [happy]? Let him sing psalms [songs of praise]." A main aspect of praise is that we give thanks to God for what He does for us. Ideally, thanksgiving should spring from a grateful heart; but it is required of all of God's people, regardless of our initial attitude.

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

There is no way to be happy without being truly thankful. We should be grateful to God for all things, but especially for His work of our salvation. We should also thank God in anticipation of His answering our prayers, knowing that His answers will always be in harmony with His perfect will for us.

The early Christians knew that they had found happiness. Seeing the truth and believing it, they had been called by God, turned away from the world, and entered the church.

**Acts 2:46-47** So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

A characteristic of the early church was long-lasting "gladness" and rejoicing. I am holding before you the picture of the early church not merely so we can have a correct view of Christianity and of the church but, more urgently, that we may test ourselves. The question that we ask ourselves in such instances is, "Am I like those early Christians were?" "Am I truly glad to be in God's church and to receive the blessings that He has given to us?"

Now we come to this extraordinary description of the early Christians in Acts. They had gladness, praised God, and were thankful. Joy has been a characteristic of the church in every period of its history. Joy is not something that necessarily figures into the average person's idea of the church. To the world, Christianity is regarded as something that spoils life. People's idea of Christianity is that it is nothing but a kind of moral striving and effort and endeavor that causes suffering.

They think God's church is always against everything. It is against smoking, drugs and war. "You cannot do this; you cannot do that" is the way they view life in the church. The average person's impression is that Christians live cramped, restricted, miserable little lives, mainly characterized by what they do not do, and who seem to find no enjoyment whatsoever in what they do. The world thinks Christianity has put some kind of brake on their lives. It stands between them and a full, free, joyous, and happy life. No one could be more deluded than those in the world.

Why do most adolescents turn against Christianity? Simply because they think that they must have the supposed freedom and enjoyment of the world. They are determined to enjoy themselves, to live a life of happiness. Often they try to make up for lost time by becoming more worldly than the worldly, trying to get more happiness than anyone else. We have seen many of our youth bolt from home as soon as they are of age, to begin their lives out from under the perceived bondage of their parents and the church. They leap into this society of sin with both feet.

They leap from the perceived bondage of the church to the real and damaging bondage of sin, Satan, and the world. They let the immature emotions of their own human reasoning rule their lives; and they make the greatest mistake of their lives, often resulting in irreversible physical and psychological

problems. They want to be just like the world—but what characterizes the world? Let me give you a short list: sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, being used and abused in relationships, and so on. Is that happiness? Is that what we should seek?

The worldly idea is that with a stern, iron will Christians force themselves to fulfill duties that they believe to be somehow right and are afraid of what will come if they do not do them. They trudge wearily through this world, missing so much. That is the attitude, and that is why so many people leave the church. They have turned their backs on it, claiming to have found happiness in doing so.

That is the exact opposite of what we find here in Acts. Here is the account of the early church: "They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people." That is the picture given of the Christian church in those early days. We can almost say that, from that century on, there has been a constant effort by Satan to pervert that and by the world to destroy it and paint the most awful picture of God's church possible.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians is a very joyful letter. He can barely contain himself. At the beginning of chapter 3, he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord," and he repeats that encouragement in chapter 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice." This is Christianity, and that was the life of the early Christians.

The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, is a stimulating book. You can feel this joy pulsing through the life of the people. It is one of the happiest books in the world.

The apostle Peter later wrote in I Peter to a number of Christian people whom he did not even know, "strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." Writing of their relationship with Jesus Christ, he says in I Peter 1:8, "whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory..." What is joy inexpressible? It means joy beyond words, beyond anything that can be described in physical terms.

That is the authentic picture, not the one that the world under Satan's influence likes to describe. That is how it began, and that is the true characteristic of the church. We read in Revelation 2 about the first era of the church, the Ephesians, and how they lost their first love. With their losing of their first love, did they also lose their happiness and joy? Some of them most likely did.

It is a travesty of the truth to think of Christianity as a grievous task and a heavy burden, leading to a mournful, apologetic way of life. In reality, there is nothing else in this world that can make us truly happy and give us joy except this message and its permanent/eternal effect. Let us then look at the nature of the joy and the gladness that these people had.

Could Christianity ever have turned the world upside-down if it were as negative as people represent it? Of course not! True Christianity is this joy, gladness, thankfulness—this indestructible quality in the life of these people. It is tremendously needed in the world today. The real effects of the joy and gladness of the church will only be seen after Christ returns and His Kingdom is set up. In the meantime, it has to be enjoyed and appreciated by only a very few.

As we look at the nature of this joy, we have to be careful. The modern world is abusing most of the things that are sacred; it is even abusing language. The world has never talked more about love than it does today, but it does not know anything about it. So often what it calls love is lust! People who pass through the divorce courts often say they have "fallen out of love" and have "fallen in love" with

someone else, but they have never opened their eyes on love. They are completely ignorant of it. All these important terms are degraded and abused by the world. Good is bad and bad is good.

We have to be careful when we talk about joy and gladness. The world thinks that it is expert in this subject. Have you noticed how "happy" the supporters are when their political candidate wins? Look at the cheerfulness at sports events. What about the liveliness and excitement while playing video games? Notice the smiling faces at the purchase of a new home or car.

We have to define our terms, and they are defined here for us. When we come to talk about "gladness and singleness of heart" as we find here in Acts 2:46, we have to take it in its context. This is what we read in Acts 2:

**Acts 2:42-43** And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

In defining joy and gladness, we have to remember that other element: fear. What fear?

The fear of God! The Holy Spirit, the mighty power of God, had descended upon them. When those men and women felt just a touch of the power of God, they were filled with fear.

There are many examples in the Bible of the fear of God. Once the apostle Peter and some of the other disciples had been out fishing all night, without catching anything. The next morning Christ said, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." They did, and immediately they caught so many fish that their net broke.

Do you remember what happened then? Peter fell down before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Christ had not said a word to Peter. He had not reprimanded him. He had not condemned him for his sinful life. All He had done was work a miracle. The greatness and the power of God was seen. Jesus Christ had manifested His divine power. When you are in the presence of the power of God, when you feel awe before a holy God, you are anxious and frightened; you feel small, insignificant, and sinful.

This is something that is little known at the present time. There is awe and thankfulness; there is gladness that comes from the miracle of the birth of a child—but there is also a fear of the Maker, a reverence of the Creator at a time like that. I know that first hand. As many of you have, I witnessed all three of my children's births.

That is the type of awe that people felt there in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit had been imparted, when it filled them. These disciples were filled with power—the power of God—and they were in awe of it.

However, that fear is not inconsistent with joy and gladness. It is here that we have the secret of our definition of those words in a Christian sense. It is so different from the joy and the gladness that the world talks about. The world's so-called joy and gladness is artificial. It is synthetic, and it is not true. That is the trouble with that joy.

On what does the joy of the world depend? It always depends on some sort of make-believe. It is false. It is a manufactured article. The world cannot find joy without drugs of some sort. That is why

all the drinking goes on; for many people it is the only way they can be happy, or so they believe. The world must get their higher levels of consciousness and understanding knocked out or blocked before they can be "happy." That is its philosophy. People who cannot be happy unless they drink are confessing that they are miserable people, that they are losers, losers of life because they willingly put themselves in darkness.

Drink! Drugs! Social life! Expensive clothes! Dinners! Entertainment! All this has to be kept going, and you know the amount of money that is being spent. Just look at the financial crisis today—all brought about by idolatry, greed, and coveting. People object to paying a little more for milk but not for pleasure. They are unthankful for what they have, and some day they will lose what they are unthankful for.

Of course, the result of that is that the world's happiness is superficial. It is only something that enables you to forget your troubles for the moment—simply some kind of tranquilizer, as it were. It takes the edge off your anxiety but does not take it away. Still the world continues this pleasure seeking and pouring out money for it. The element of the fear of God is never there. That is why the apostle Paul says,

**Ephesians 5:18** And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.

Paul is contrasting two forms of joy here. The joy of the world, he says, has a lack of control. There is a wildness about it that they regret afterwards. Of course, the final trouble about the joy that the world has to give is that it is invariably dependent on circumstances. This is what reveals to us the real tragedy of life without Christ and without God's Truth. I am almost leery of people I meet that appear unusually happy.

You have known them, husband and wife, living a life of happiness together—but the joy has been entirely dependent on their relationship to one another and their material success and not to our God and Father and our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a good thing to be able to temporarily enjoy such physical things, but not at the expense of neglecting a good relationship with our God and our Savior.

We have seen that if one partner dies, the other is left devastated and desolate. Even at its very best and highest, the joy that the world has is a contingent joy. I am not in any way criticizing the love between a husband and a wife and the joy and happiness that comes. All I am saying is that it is physical, temporary, and has death at the end of it, compared to permanent, eternal joy.

Also, so much of the joy of the world vanishes if you do not have money. If you cannot afford to buy the pleasures, then you have no pleasure and are not happy. You sit sulking in a corner, envious of those who are enjoying themselves and wishing that you were doing the same.

Joy that demands health and wealth and the presence of other people is not real, long-lasting, permanent joy. It is not the eternal joy and the gladness that we seek. Analyze it, and you will find that it is true.

Christian joy is a deep joy, a pure and holy joy. Scripture calls it "joy of the Holy Spirit" in Romans 14:17. This is a joy that includes the element of fear. The world, of course, says you cannot mix fear and joy, but you can. That is the only true joy, because it puts it in the right perspective. Of course, when I speak of the fear of God, I speak of the reverence, dedication, devotion, and obedience. There

is a control; there is a depth; there is a holiness. It is a joy that comes from God. It is a part, a foretaste of the very glory of God that He shares with those in whom Jesus Christ dwells.

The apostle Peter talks of a joy that is "unspeakable and full of glory." He means that it is such a wonderful joy that language is inadequate to describe it. Do you know anything about a joy that is so amazing that you cannot find words to express it? That is the joy that these people had, a joy that is full of glory and unalloyed purity.

This joy is independent of circumstances. It is easy to be happy when the sun is shining and everything is going well, when we have our pockets full of money and our family all around us. But what if we lost it all? Where would we be then? Remember Job lost it all. He was still considered a righteous man, but he had lessons to learn.

When you have lost your money, the world can be cruel and cold. It does not want you; you are of no value to it. The world only wants cheerful people. When you need its help most of all, it has nothing to give you and turns its back on you. There are superficial jabs at aid. The UN is a case in point: It spends huge sums of money but solves and fixes nothing. Their efforts are all dismal failures, while the corrupt leaders get richer.

The only joy worth talking about, the joy that we should surely be seeking, is the joy that is independent of circumstances. That is why, through the Tribulation and the Day of Lord, whether we are in the Place of Safety or not, we can still have that happiness and gladness that the first-century church had. That is what was so wonderful about this joy that these first Christians had. After they became Christians, they were persecuted and maltreated, but they still had this joy.

In the book of Acts, there are some wonderful pictures of this joy in the midst of persecution. Let me give you just one of them. The apostle Paul and a companion of his, called Silas, visited the town of Philippi to which Paul later wrote his joyful letter. When Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi, they preached the Gospel by the river, at a place where people were in the habit of meeting to pray. A poor demon-possessed girl who, we are told, "had a spirit of divination" began to follow Paul and Silas. She was sarcastically calling out, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which show to us the way of salvation."

After this went on for many days, Paul and Silas cast the evil spirit out of the girl. Her masters, who had made money through her, therefore went to the authorities and said that Paul and Silas were lawbreakers, and they were turning everything upside down. The magistrates arrested them. Though Paul and Silas were perfectly innocent and had not even had a trial, they were scourged; that is, their backs were beaten with whips and with cords. It is a very painful method of beating. Then they were thrown into the high security area of the prison, and their feet were fastened in the stocks.

What effect did that have on Paul and Silas? This is what we are told:

**Acts 16:25** But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Something miraculous was happening in that prison. Two groups of people were there: Paul and Silas, servants of Christ, members of the church; and the other prisoners, the unbelievers, the godless, men of the world who were in prison.

The worldly group were miserable, unable to sleep at night, because they were so unhappy, wondering how they had ever gotten there, and how they could get out. They were typical of those who have no joy apart from what the world supplies. They certainly were not thankful and joyful about their condition. Most likely, they were not thinking of God or having any fear of Him, although many may have been praying to their god or gods for deliverance.

In the midst of such adversity, however, Paul and Silas were singing praises to God, "and the prisoners heard them," and they and the keeper of the prison were amazed. This is a joy that is not dependent on circumstances. The apostle Paul says to the Romans,

**Romans 5:2-5** ...through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

We glory in tribulations also. When everything goes against us, we are still rejoicing. That is the ideal setting, and that is what we are shooting to be able to do under such duress.

Later, when he was again in prison, Paul wrote to the Philippians.

**Philippians 4:11-13** Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul knew what it was to be on trial, with people saying, "We will come and stand by you," only to disappear at the critical moment. Remember what he told Timothy?

**II Timothy 4:16** At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.

These are things that we really do need to think about ahead of time, before we are blind-sided by persecution or possibly even imprisonment. Can we maintain that happiness and gladness that the first-century church had through persecution and tribulation?

Paul stood firm and went on rejoicing in tribulations! His joy was independent of circumstances. Everything could go against him, but he still went on rejoicing. Now that alone is true joy and happiness.

We will all eventually be in a position in which most of the things on which we rely in this world will be taken from us. Here is a great test of life: How will you stand up to loss and calamity if God should allow you to go through something? How will you face death? Can you rejoice then?

The world, of course, cannot meet the test; it cannot face it. On their deathbeds, people do not call for drink; they do not want that funny sitcom on television. When you are sorrowing, you do not turn to things like that.

It is a terrible thing when a person is left alone, going out of this life alone, out of this world alone. Can a person rejoice then? Will you know gladness in that situation? Here is the test. These people in the first days of the church knew that kind of joy. This is what Christianity offers. This is the nature of its joy, gladness, and thanksgiving.

What is the explanation of such joy and gladness? Can we all obtain this? The message is that we can. We have to do what these early Christians did. They "gladly received the word," the preaching of the apostle Peter, the teaching of Jesus Christ.

**Acts 2:41** Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

When they cried to him, saying, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." "You shall receive gladness that lasts."

That is what must be done initially. You have to realize that the so-called joy and gladness of the world is a wretched counterfeit. That realization is repentance. You confess to God, and you go to Him and ask Him for mercy and forgiveness. This is what the early Christians did, and that is a major step to wonderful joy and happiness that lasts. Those of us that are baptized have already started this process this move toward true happiness.

The secret, in a sense, is to understand that happiness is the consequence of something else. The world makes the great mistake of putting happiness as its goal and, therefore, never finds it. Happiness is never meant to be a goal. Christ put it in one memorable phrase:

**Matthew 5:6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Not those who hunger and thirst for happiness will be "blessed and happy" but for righteousness. In the first hymn in our hymnal we sing, "Blessed and happy is the man who does never walk astray."

Why were these three thousand people mentioned in Acts 2 so happy? It was because they had been called by God and heard Peter's sermon and believed it. It was also because day by day they had listened to the apostles' teaching and had known true fellowship and prayer.

This is the experience of every true Christian. Christians are glad and rejoice because of the deliverance they have received from what they once were. They have been delivered from appalling ignorance about God and about themselves. Look at the society in which the first-century Christians lived. It was one of death, tribulation, persecution, war, and famine and pestilence because of that war. This way of life was such a refreshing way of life. It was so different, the opposite of what they had known.

Christians have been delivered from spiritual danger. Those first Christians were "pricked in their heart." They had suddenly seen themselves under the wrath of God. They had seen themselves for what they really were. They had seen that men and women are not animals but creatures made in the image and likeness of God, that they are responsible beings who will have to make a stand before their Maker and give an account of the life lived in this world. They had seen that nothing was facing

them but misery and wretchedness and suffering—separation from the presence of God. They had seen the enormity of their rejection of Christ.

Now, though, they could be delivered from condemnation and from the wrath to come, and that began the process of happiness in their lives. Anyone who truly knows and understands that is happy. A new Christian is like a drowning man in the ocean who has exhausted all his efforts. He sees the end has come has abandoned himself in his utter hopelessness. Suddenly a hand from somewhere grips him and pulls him out.

Can you imagine that man's feelings when he is lying in the boat of this friend who suddenly appeared and rescued him? Multiply that by infinity, and that is the thankfulness, the gladness, the joy of a person who becomes a Christian. Look what the Christian has been delivered from: spiritual darkness, physical and spiritual misery, and final/permanent death.

It is wonderful to be delivered from dependence on the world and its ways. The ways of the world do not even provide people of great wealth and stature with happiness. They are not thankful for what they have; they just want more power, prestige, and wealth. They are ready at any moment to figuratively cut one another's throats. They are filled with envy and jealousy. This is the attitude found throughout the working world. It is in the highest academic circles, and it is a wretched, miserable, warring life.

It is glorious to be delivered from such worldly ambition, such hollow, worldly success. Physical and monetary success can be good and right; but if you live for it and make it the object of your life, it is wretched. It is slavery. It is idolatry. This new life delivers men and women from all that. Now we belong to a new society and a new kingdom—the kingdom of peace—the kingdom of God.

**II Corinthians 3:17-18** Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

With that "glory to glory" comes happiness and gladness. We are free to fear God. We are independent of the world and circumstances and chance and accident. We are overcoming the world. (I speak of this mainly in the spiritual area.) We see the plan of God, the purposes of God at work in the world.

**I John 5:4-5** For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Furthermore, we have a wonderful view of the future. The future is the problem for humanity. They may be "happy" at this moment, but nobody knows what will happen tomorrow or even in the next moment. For human beings there is the uncertainty of life, the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the successes and failures. The world is only happy on the upside of things.

There is the trouble, and that is why men and women are not really happy. Everywhere there is a spirit of fear. "What if another war is coming? What if the economy collapses? What if I cannot pay my bills? What am I left with then?" They have no rest or peace, as we do in God's church.

How does the world deal with this? They stop thinking. Then, they drug themselves in some way or another. All they do is fool themselves. They intentionally place themselves in an artificial, make-believe world with the use of alcohol and drugs.

In Acts 2, we see people who have a gladness and a joy that enables them to face the future, no matter what may come. Christians do not expect too much of this world. If we expect too of this world, we will be greatly disappointed often. We know that Jesus said,

**John 16:33** "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

He also said,

**Matthew 24:6** "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet."

We recognize that this is an evil, sinful world and that while it is so it will be a place of unhappiness. All sorrow and death itself comes as the result of sin. This world is full of sin and, therefore, full of unhappiness.

Thus, Christians do not expect much of the world. We are ready to meet life; we are prepared for every eventuality. We see the wholeness of life and know we will never be left alone again, because God has said, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." We are ready to face the rest of our lives. We no longer depend on the life of this world but on the life of God. Even death is of no real consequence because it no longer has any sting for us. The apostle Paul writes,

**I Corinthians 15:51-55** Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"

Worldly people are afraid of death because the sting is still in it for them. Deep down, they fear that after death there is a judgment. The law of God condemns sinners, and that is its sting.

**I Corinthians 15:56-58** The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Christ won the victory for us. He has vanquished death and the grave. With God's help, we now have the opportunity to do our responsibility.

**Philippians 1:19-23** For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live

is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.

Although the apostle Paul would rather have died and waited for his resurrection in the grave, since there was no longer the sting in death for him, he knew that he had more of God's work to do and that his efforts would produce more spiritual fruit. He was thankful for the opportunity. He was content to continue living, even in his tired and suffering condition. He was content to die, if that was going to happen, but he also realized that he had to live on, and help others to Christ. He would rather have been waiting for his resurrection.

That is why the members in Acts 2 were glad; that is why they were filled with a spirit of rejoicing. They saw through life; they saw through death and beyond death. They had been given a glimpse of the glory that awaits them. This is what fills the people of God with true gladness, joy, and rejoicing. This is what the Word of God does. This view of life is ready for anything. It can never be disappointed. It can never be put to shame. It is the life of God in us.

Happiness is the consequence of a choice, a choice between life or death, good or bad. Therefore, choose life, and in doing so, you choose happiness! The apostle Paul, while looking at the great problems, trials, and tribulations of life, was genuinely able to say:

**Colossians 3:2-4** Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

If we set our minds on the things above, then, like the first Christians, we will be filled with a spirit of gladness; and we will spend our days praising and thanking the God who has delivered us out of the kingdom of darkness and is translating us into His own kingdom. The world has made temporary thrills and material possessions their gods, but "happy are the people whose God is the Lord!"