



GOOD FOR YOU? | IS CHRISTIANITY DEPRESSING?

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Over the last several months we have engaged in a sermon series in which we have considered some of the contemporary challenges to the Christian faith in order to figure out if Christianity is, in fact, good for you and good for the world. The question that I'd like to take up this morning is, "Is Christianity depressing?"

Here's what I mean by that. The ultimate goal for many people today is the pursuit of happiness. If you ask someone, "What's your vision of the good life?" most people would probably respond by saying, "Being happy and feeling good." That's true even for people who say they believe in God. We assume that God is there to make us feel better.

The problem with historic Orthodox Christianity is that it forces us to confront the reality of pain and loss and suffering and death. More than that, it draws attention to the fact that, more often than not, our problems in life stem from our own sinfulness or self-centeredness or rebellion or failure. And that doesn't necessarily feel good. We don't like to be reminded of these truths, and so we might rightly ask, "Isn't this kind of a downer? Wouldn't it be better to just focus on the positive?" So is Christianity depressing?

In order to find out, let's turn to the first chapter of the first letter of Peter. As we do, I'd like us to consider three things: 1) *the pursuit of happiness*, 2) *the paradox of happiness*, and 3) *the perfection of happiness*.

⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The Pursuit Of Happiness

What you need to understand is that Peter was writing to several different communities of Christians that were scattered throughout the Roman provinces of Asia Minor, what we now know as modern Turkey. The reason why Peter writes to these communities of Christians is because they were suffering. As my ninth grade English teacher used to remind us on almost a weekly basis, life's not fair. He writes because they're suffering. What makes it harder, perhaps, is that they're suffering as Christians. Many of us are tempted to think, "If I believe in God, if I'm committed to Jesus, if I have the Holy Spirit, shouldn't I be inoculated against life's sorrows?" But it doesn't work that way. Throughout this letter, Peter speaks in generalities. He doesn't

go into specifics, so we don't know exactly what's going on. That's precisely the point. It could be anything. The suffering they're experiencing could be anything.

But the truly shocking thing is that Peter calls us to rejoice in the midst of our suffering. Most of us would probably say, "Rejoice? Are you kidding me? You want me to rejoice when the bottom of my life is dropping out?" Peter says, "Yes, rejoice." He's not saying that we will one day rejoice after all of our suffering is over. No, he's saying you can rejoice now even in the midst of it. But how could that possibly be?

Let me take a moment to explain why this sounds absolutely crazy to us. As modern people, we've experienced a rather dramatic shift in our conception of the good life compared to the past. In the past, ancient people would have conceived of the good life as becoming a particular kind of person, and that often meant turning away from sin and then cultivating the qualities and the characteristics of a life of virtue. But now the good life is often conceived not as becoming a particular kind of person, but rather experiencing a particular kind of feeling.

Sometimes this shift is referred to as the therapeutic turn. We no longer refer to sin. Instead, we seem to replace the category of sin with the category of sickness. We don't really think so much about being culpable or responsible for our actions. We emphasize the idea that we're being acted upon by forces outside of our control, and therefore we can't really help it. What do we mean by these terms, "sin" and "sickness?"

On the one hand, sickness and health are metaphors that are used even in the Bible to describe the spiritual life. The word salvation is very closely related to the Greek word for healing. Jesus himself was a healer. We refer to him as the great physician. When we talk about this therapeutic turn, we're not taking a knock at therapy. Many of us have gained insight from therapy. Many of us have benefited from the gifts of counseling. But what I want you to see is that something more is going on here when we speak of this therapeutic turn.

In 1966 there was a sociologist named Philip Rieff who wrote a book titled "The Triumph of the Therapeutic." In this book, he tried to describe the difference between our conception of the good life in the past versus today. The way in which he captured the idea was by describing people in the past as the religious person and the modern one as the psychological person. He says the religious person seeks to be saved, but the psychological person seeks to be pleased. He writes that the difference was long established when once the phrase of the religious person "I believe" lost out to the words of the psychological person "I feel." As a result of that, we no longer think of the good life as something that is found along the path of self-discipline. Rather, we imagine that the good life is found along the path of self-actualization. Of course, what drops out of this equation is any language about sin and suffering or wrongdoing. But the problem is that not everything can be subsumed under that category of sickness. Imagine if a person experienced overwhelming sadness because they felt guilt or shame. After this therapeutic turn, we would no longer assume that perhaps that means we need to deal with God. No, now we assume that we just need to adjust our mindset somehow. That's the therapeutic turn.

I want us to consider how that impacts the way in which we think about God and our relationship to him. A few years ago, another sociologist named Christian Smith conducted a massive research project on the spiritual lives of young people. He coined the phrase “moralistic therapeutic deism” to describe the dominant default religion of most people in the world today.

By moralistic, what he means is that most people assume God simply wants us to be nice, and that God rewards the good people by taking them to heaven when they die. He uses the term therapeutic in the same sense that Philip Rieff did. He’s not talking about therapy or medical treatment, but rather he’s saying this therapeutic belief is the idea that we simply want to be happy, and we think that God wants us to be happy and to feel good. When he speaks of deism, he’s not talking about technical 18th century deism — the idea that God is the divine watchmaker who creates the world and then sets it in motion and otherwise has nothing to do with it. No, he’s talking about sort of a modern spin on 18th century deism.

We today assume that if there is a God, that God doesn’t play an active role in our lives, but he is on call if we ever need him. So Smith speaks of this conception of God as a kind of divine butler or a cosmic therapist. For the most part, he leaves you alone, and he doesn’t show up. He stays in the quarters, the servant’s quarters, but if you ring a bell, God will come to the rescue and help you solve your problems. Or he’s the cosmic therapist who’s there simply to help you feel better about yourself.

The Paradox of Happiness

Let me turn now from the pursuit of happiness to the paradox of happiness. As modern Western people, we define the good life as being happy and feeling good. We’re pursuing a particular feeling, and if we acknowledge God’s existence at all, we believe that he’s simply there to solve our problems and to grant our wishes. But if a feeling of happiness is what we’re really after, what do we actually think will make us happy?

Another author suggests that our vision of happiness is sort of like taking a job resume, a dating profile, and a Christmas list and rolling them all up in one. That’s our vision of the good life. First, we take a job profile and we assume that we’ll be happy if we achieve career success or if we receive public recognition or critical acclaim, and if we accumulate more wealth, status, and power, and then we roll that up with a dating profile. We assume we’ll be happy if we develop a certain body type, if we increase our sexual allure, and if we attract the right romantic partner. And then we combine that with a Christmas list. We assume that we’ll be happy if we accumulate more stuff: clothes, jewelry, experiences, or gadgets and gizmos. This author suggests that we basically combine meritocracy with consumerism, and that becomes our vision of what it means to live happily ever after.

What I’d like to suggest to you is that the pursuit of happiness is paradoxical. It’s paradoxical because we find true happiness in the exact opposite place where we think we will. Consider for a moment if you were to attain all those things that we think will make us happy. Let’s say you earn straight A’s. You get into grad school. Boy meets girl. You land the dream job. You get published or promoted or platformed. You finally move into the corner office, and then what? As soon as you close your

fingers around the prize, you might find yourself thinking that it feels like nothing at all. That's the problem of basing our happiness on achievement or success. Our ambitions will always outstrip our actual achievements, leaving us feeling anxious and dissatisfied because our achievements can never actually deliver what they seem to promise. Of course, we have to ask ourselves the question, "What if we fail to achieve all that we set out to do, or what if we undermine our own attempts to accomplish things because of our own stupidity or folly or failure?" The way in which we pursue happiness actually doesn't make any sense.

Here's a second reason why the pursuit of happiness is paradoxical. If you root your happiness in success and achievement, then not only will your sense of well-being fluctuate with your ever changing circumstances, but the fact of the matter is, everything you've ever accomplished, everything you've ever achieved, eventually will be washed away by the waves of time. Even our most worthy causes, even our most meaningful contributions to this world are like building sandcastles on the seashore. Eventually everything will be washed away by the waves of time. Stop to think about that. Considering our inevitable demise, considering the fact that we'll lose the ones that we love the most, that we'll lose our own health, that everyone and everything we've ever loved will one day slip through our grasp, just that thought is enough to undercut our experience of happiness now. What do we do with that? The fact is, we cannot escape pain and suffering, and therefore we need a source of joy that is not rooted in our circumstances. And more than that, we need a source of joy that enhances rather than diminishes our sense of well-being, even in the midst of our suffering and even despite our sin, wrongdoing, and failure. Where do we find a source of joy like that?

It turns out that the pursuit of happiness is paradoxical. We find it in the exact opposite place than we might expect. We do not find it by avoiding sin and suffering, but rather we find it actually in the midst of sin and suffering. That leads me from the paradox of happiness to turn to the perfection of happiness.

The Perfection Of Happiness

When Augustine, one of the early church fathers, was 19 years old, he read a book by Cicero titled "Hortensius." In this book, Cicero explores why everybody in life sets out to be happy, and yet the vast majority of people are miserable, and he wonders why that is. This sets Augustine on a lifelong project to discover the true secret to happiness. Eventually, he identified the root *cause* of the problem and the ultimate *remedy*.

The Cause

What's the root cause of the problem? Why are we so discontent? In response to that, Augustine realized that we human beings are fundamentally defined and shaped not by what we believe or think or do, but by what we love. Human beings are not first and foremost believers or thinkers or doers. We're lovers. You are what you love. If you stop and think about it, that makes sense. You are whatever you most love in that moment. Whatever you most love in any moment will control all your thinking and all your acting. If what you most love is acceptance, then you'll do just about anything to please people. Or if what you really love is power, then you'll do almost anything to control people. We are what we most love. That is the root cause of the problem.

Human beings are just a bundle of loves, and the issue is that our loves are all mixed up. There's an order to the heart, but we don't love the right things in the right order, and that is the source of all of our problems. We tend to love less important things more, and the more important things less. That is the source of our discontentment. But if that is the root cause of our unhappiness, what's the remedy?

The Remedy

The answer is that we have to love first things first. We need a rightly ordered heart, and if we're going to love first things first, that means that we have to love God above all else. We know that's true, because if we attained everything that this world has to offer — the best of what this world has to offer — we would still be unsatisfied, because we know that in our heart of hearts, there's a degree of delight and fulfillment that this world alone can't satisfy, which means that we are made for something beyond this world. The key is to realize that there is no lasting happiness to be found outside of God. The only way to be truly happy is to make him our first love, to have a rightly ordered heart where we love God first and then and only then can we love everything else as a gift of his grace in its proper place.

The real question is, if we want to be truly happy, how do we learn to love God? How do we learn to love him first? Let me answer that question under the categories of *sin*, *suffering*, and *salvation*.

Sin

As we said, if you boil it all down, sin is simply a failure to love the right things in the right order. We fail to love God first with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and we fail to love others as ourselves. If there is a God who made us, who knows us, who loves us, who keeps us, who gave us this whole world to enjoy, then we owe him everything. Everything we are, everything we have is a gift of his hand. We owe him everything. Therefore, to fail to love this God would be infinitely worse than failing to love a parent who serves us and sacrifices for us. And once you begin to realize that we owe him everything. We owe him the fullness of our hearts, then that softens our heart toward him because we realize how deeply we've offended him by failing to love him.

And yet the wonder of the gospel is that, though we have wronged God by scorning His love, He doesn't repay us in kind. He doesn't respond to us with vengeance but rather with grace. He becomes a human being in the person of Jesus in order to absorb the debt we owe rather than to dish it back in retaliation. On the cross, Jesus dies in our place as our substitute in order to bear our sin and take it away so that we might be reconciled in relationship to God. And once we realize the depth of his love for us — that he would do so much for us, that he would sacrifice so much for us despite the fact that we've scorned his love — that's what ignites our love for him in return.

Suffering

Then that brings us to the question of suffering. It's not just our sin; it's also suffering. God not only loves us despite our sin, but our love for him grows rather than shrinks in the midst of suffering because Jesus not only became a human being on our behalf, but he suffered on our behalf. We tend to think that suffering contradicts the gospel,

but in fact, suffering confirms the gospel because it shows that we're on the same path as Jesus himself. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, suffered, and therefore suffering cannot be a sign that God is absent from us. If anything, suffering is a sign that he is more present than ever. If Jesus suffered, then so will we. As all the four gospels make clear, the moment when Jesus entered into his greatest glory was precisely at the moment when he experienced the worst suffering.

Suffering and glory are not opposed to one another; they coincide. Jesus enters into his glory on the cross, the moment of suffering, and therefore that's often the way of the Christian life as well. Suffering and glory go together. They can't be separated. And so rather than suffering being a sign of God's absence, it's a sign of his presence. He may be closer to us now more than ever when we suffer. That's what causes our love to grow rather than shrink, even in the midst of suffering.

Salvation

The reason why is because God often uses suffering to refine our faith, the outcome of which, Peter says, is the salvation of our souls. He likens the refining of faith to the refining of gold. In the ancient world, as well as today, one of the most precious commodities, one of the most valuable possessions, was gold. But even gold had to be put through the crucible of the refiner's fire in order to be purified, in order to become the genuine article — the real thing.

Let me just ask you, what's the one thing that if you were to lose it, you might despair of life itself? Peter has a unique take on that. What's the one thing that should be most precious to us in the whole world? Our faith. You say, "My faith? My faith is the most precious thing I have, the most important thing?" That's not what most of us would probably say. No. We'd say, "No, the thing that I value more than anything else in this world is my relationships — my relationships with my friends or with my spouse, my family, my kids. Or maybe the thing that I value most above all is my health, my well being, my future." But Peter says, no, the most precious thing we have is our faith because the outcome of our faith is our salvation. It's only as our faith is refined, leading ultimately to that salvation, that we know that finally one day we will love God as we should. One day we will put him first. One day he will be our first love. And then finally everything else will fall into its proper place.

That's why Peter can tell us, despite our sin, and even in the midst of our suffering, though we have not seen him, we love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him, and you rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. Is it not a wonder that Peter praises the love that his readers have for Jesus even though they have not seen him. Peter had seen Jesus. Peter had seen Jesus with his own eyes. But perhaps what is even more important is not that Peter had seen Jesus but that Jesus had seen Peter.

What stands out to me is that the Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus told Peter in advance that he would deny ever knowing him at the moment of Jesus' greatest need. But Jesus tells Peter, "Though you're going to let me down, I have prayed for you. Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I prayed for you that your faith will not fail, so that when you turn, you might strengthen others." Then we watch as the fateful moment arrives, and in weakness, Peter denies ever

knowing Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. And then the rooster crows. But only in the Gospel of Luke do we read that at that very moment — at that very precise moment — Jesus turned and looked at Peter from across the courtyard. Their eyes met. Their eyes locked. What kind of a look do you think Jesus gave Peter in that moment, as he denies ever knowing the man?

Some people think it must have been a look of disapproval or disappointment, as if to say, “How could you?” or “I knew it. I knew you would do this.” No, I don’t think it was a look of disapproval or disappointment. I think Jesus looks at Peter across that courtyard the same way that Mark 10 tells us that Jesus looked at the rich young ruler. He looked at him and loved him. He looked at him and loved him, as if to say, “Yes, I told you in advance that this would happen. But don’t forget, never forget: I prayed for you. I see you. I love you. And I will see you through this. Your faith will not fail, because I have prayed for you, and when you turn, use this opportunity, use this crucible to strengthen others.” The more we understand who Jesus is, the depth of what he’s done for us by his grace, the more we come to understand who he really is, and we love him. Even though you do not see him, you love him. Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. You may not be able to see Jesus, but Jesus sees you. So is Christianity depressing? Oh, no. It is the key to joy, because it is not based on our circumstances. No, instead it transcends them all, even our sin and our suffering.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we acknowledge that we are all pursuing happiness, and yet many of us fail to truly find it. Help us to remember today that the pursuit of happiness is paradoxical. It's found in the exact opposite place we might think. And therefore we pray that you would perfect this pursuit by helping us to see the root cause of the problem and the remedy. The root cause is that our loves are all mixed up. We love the wrong things in the wrong order. We fail to love the right things in the right order. Help us to love you first, to put you first in our heart and in our lives, but only because you have first loved us. We can't see you in the same way that you can see us, but we love you. Help our love to grow. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.