

THE HAPPINESS OF GOD: FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN HEDONISM

(Jeremiah 32:36-41)

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I referred to the idea of Christian Hedonism once in a Sunday service, and a parent came up to me later and said, "Did you know that our little girl thought you were saying Christian heathenism?" I know that even when I get my pronunciation clear (Christian Hedonism) some of you will probably still think "heathenism" because you believe hedonism is a heathen philosophy of life. And you are probably right because the popular meaning of hedonism is pleasure seeking and moral indifference. In 2 Timothy 3:4 Paul warned that in the last days men would be "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." And surely we are in those days.

Two years ago Daniel Yankelovitch published a book entitled New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down. He argues on the basis of extensive interviews and nationwide polls that massive shifts have occurred in our culture and that the widespread search for personal self-fulfillment has created a new set of rules that govern the way we think and feel as Americans. He says, "In their extreme form the new rules simply turn the old ones on their head, and in place of the old self-denial ethic we find people who refuse to deny anything to themselves -- not out of bottomless appetite, but on the strange moral principle that 'I have a duty to myself.'" (p. xviii). He tells of a young woman in her mid-thirties who complained to her psychotherapist that she was becoming nervous and fretful because life had grown so hectic -- too many big weekends, too many discos, too many late hours, too much talk, too much wine, too much pot, too much lovemaking. "Why don't you stop?" asked the therapist mildly. The patient stared blankly for a moment, and then her face lit up, dazzled by an illumination: "You mean I really don't have to do what I want to?" she burst out in amazement. The trademark of the new self-fulfillment seekers is that "they operate on the premise that emotional cravings are sacred objects and that it is a crime against nature to harbor an unfulfilled emotional need" (p. 59). "Ours is the first era when tens of millions of people offer as moral justification for their acts the idea that an inner and presumably more 'real' self does not fit well with their assigned social role."

Probably the relationship in which the self-fulfillment seekers and their new rules have caused the greatest upheaval is marriage. Yankelovitch has good insight when he says, "Successful marriages are woven out of many strands of inhibited desire -- accessions to the wishes of the other; acceptance of infringements on one's own wishes; disappointments swallowed; confrontations avoided; opportunities for anger bypassed; chances for self-expression muted. To introduce the strong form of self-fulfillment urge into this process is to take a broomstick to a delicate web. Often all that is left is the sticky stuff that adheres to the broom; the structure of the web is destroyed" (p 76).

Therefore I have a deep empathy with those of you who are free enough from our culture to react to the word hedonism by saying, "Enough of it! Our homes, our schools, our businesses, our society are being destroyed by hedonistic self-fulfillment seekers who have none of the moral courage and self-denial and rugged commitment and sacrificial allegiance which holds together the precious structures of life and brings nobility to our culture. We don't need hedonism; we need a return to rectitude, integrity, prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, self-control!" Believe me, we are probably closer than you

think. All I ask is that you give me an open and discerning ear for nine weeks before you make your final judgment about Christian Hedonism.

Sometimes an illustration is worth a thousand words of abstract definition. So instead of giving you a precise definition of Christian Hedonism let me start by giving some Biblical examples of it. David counsels Christian Hedonism when he commands, "Delight yourself in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). And he demonstrates the kernel of Christian Hedonism when he cries out, "As a deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for thee O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:1-2). Moses was a Christian Hedonist (according to Hebrews 11:24-27) because he rejected the "fleeting pleasures" of sin, but "considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward." The saints in Hebrews 10:34 were Christian Hedonists because they chose to risk their lives to visit Christian prisoners and joyfully accepted the plundering of their own property since they knew that they themselves had a better possession and an abiding one. The apostle Paul commended Christian Hedonism when he said in Romans 12:8, Let him who does acts of mercy do them with cheerfulness. And Jesus Christ the pioneer and perfecter of our faith set the greatest standard of Christian Hedonism because "his delight was in the fear of the Lord (Is. 11:3) and, for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2).

Christian Hedonism teaches that the desire to be happy is God-given and should not be denied or resisted but directed to God for satisfaction. Christian Hedonism does not say that whatever you enjoy is good. It says that God has shown you what is good and doing it ought to bring you joy (Micah 6:8). And since doing the will of God ought to bring you joy the pursuit of joy is an essential part of all moral effort. If you abandon the pursuit of joy (and thus refuse to be a Hedonist, as I use the term) you cannot fulfill the will of God. Christian Hedonism affirms that the godliest saints of every age have discovered no contradiction in saying, on the one hand, "We are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom. 8:36) and on the other hand, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). Christian Hedonism does not join the culture of self-gratification that makes you a slave of your sinful impulses. Christian Hedonism commands that we not be conformed to this age but that we be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2) so we can delight to do the will of our Father in heaven. According to Christian Hedonism joy in God is not optional icing on the cake of Christianity. When you think it through joy in God is an essential part of saving faith.

Today I want to uncover for you the foundation of Christian Hedonism: the happiness of God. I'll try to support three observations from Scripture: 1) God is happy because he delights in himself. 2) God is happy because he is sovereign. 3) God's happiness is the foundation for Christian Hedonism because it spills over in mercy to us.

1) First, God is happy because he delights in himself. God would be unjust if he valued anything more than what is supremely valuable. And he is supremely valuable. If he did not take infinite delight in his own glory he would be unrighteous, because it is right to take delight in a person in proportion to the excellence of their glory. The Scriptures are saturated with texts showing how God unwaveringly acts out of a love for his own glory. "For my own sake, for my own sake I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another (Is. 48:11)."

The same thing appears when we ponder the relationship of God the Father to God the Son. There is a mystery here beyond all human comprehension. And I admit that our theological efforts to describe the self-consciousness of God and its relationship to the Trinity are like the stammering of a toddler about his father. But even out of the mouths of babes may come wisdom if we follow Scripture. Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God (John 1:1). And in Hebrews 1:3 it says that "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." 2 Corinthians 4:4 speaks of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. From these passages we learn that from all eternity God the Father beheld the

image of his own glory perfectly represented in the person of his Son. Therefore, one of the best ways to think about God's immense happiness in his own glory is to think of it as the delight he has in his Son who is the image of that glory. When Jesus entered the world God the Father said, "this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). When God the Father beholds the glory of his own essence in the person of his Son he is infinitely happy. "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (Is. 42:1). So the first observation is that God is happy because he delights in himself, especially as his nature is reflected in his beloved Son.

2) Second, God is happy because he is sovereign. Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases." What this verse implies is that God's sovereignty is his right and power to do whatever makes him happy. Our God is in heaven -- he is over all things and subject to none. Therefore, he does whatever he pleases -- he always acts to preserve his maximum happiness. God is happy because his righteous acts, which are always done out of love to his own glory, can never be frustrated beyond his will. Isaiah 43:13, "I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?" Isaiah 46:10 "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose." Daniel 4:35, "He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What doest thou?'" We may be sure therefore, that God is infinitely happy because he has absolute right and power as Creator to overcome every obstacle to his joy.

It's worth asking as a parenthesis here how a good God can be happy when the world is shot through with suffering and evil? It's a huge and hard question. Two things help me. One is that it doesn't help much to save God's reputation by saying that he is not really in charge. If someone had tried to comfort me in December 1974 when my mother was killed in a bus accident, by saying, "God didn't will this to happen. You can still trust him. He's good.", I would have answered by saying, "My consolation does not come from thinking that God is so weak he can't divert the lumber on top a VW van." My God is sovereign. He took her in his appointed time; and I believe now and someday I will see that it was good. For I have learned in Jesus Christ that God is good. The Biblical solution to the problem of evil is not to rob God of his sovereignty.

The other observation that helps me with this question is that God's attitude toward tragic events depends on the focus of the lens. God does not delight in pain and evil considered simply in themselves. When his lens is narrow and focused just on that, he can be filled with abhorrence and grief. But when he opens his lens to take in all the connections and effects of an event even to eternity the event forms part of a pattern or mosaic which he does delight in, and which he wills. For example, the death of Christ was the work of God the Father. "We esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted ... It was the will of the Lord to bruise him and he has put him to grief "(Is. 53:4,10). Yet surely as God the Father saw the agony of his beloved Son and the wickedness that brought him to the cross, he did not delight in those things in themselves. Sin in itself and the suffering of the innocent in itself is abhorrent to God. But according to Hebrews 2:10 God the Father thought it was fitting to perfect the Pioneer of our salvation through suffering. God willed what he abhorred in the narrow view because in the broad view of eternity it was a fitting way to demonstrate his righteousness (Rom. 3:25f) and bring his people to glory (Heb. 2:10). When God in his omniscience surveys the sweep of redemptive history from beginning to end, he rejoices in what he sees. Therefore I conclude that nothing in all the world can frustrate the ultimate happiness of God. He delights infinitely in his own glory; and in his sovereignty he does whatever he pleases.

3) Which brings us now to the final observation: God's happiness is the foundation of Christian Hedonism because his happiness spills over in mercy to us. Can you imagine what it would be like if the God who ruled the world were not happy? What if God were given to grumbling and pouting and depression like some Jack and the beanstalk giant in the sky? What if God were despondent and gloomy and dismal and discontented and dejected and frustrated? Could we join David and say, "O God, thou art

my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is" (Ps. 63:1)? No way! We would all relate to God like little children have to a gloomy, dismal, discontented, frustrated Father. They can't enjoy him. They can only try to avoid him and maybe try to work for him to make him feel better. Therefore the foundation of Christian Hedonism is that God is infinitely happy, because the aim of Christian Hedonism is to be happy in God, to delight in God, to cherish and enjoy fellowship with God. But children cannot enjoy the company of their father if he is gloomy and dismal and frustrated. And so the basis and foundation of Christian Hedonism is that God is the happiest of all beings.

Here is another way to say it. In order for a sinner to pursue joy in God he must be confident that God will not shut him out when he comes seeking forgiveness and fellowship. How can we be encouraged that God will treat us with mercy when we repent from our sin and come seeking joy in him? Consider this encouragement from Jeremiah 9:24, "I am the Lord who performs mercy and justice and righteousness in the earth, because in these things I delight' says the Lord." God shows mercy because he delights in it. God is not constrained to save by some formal principle or rule. He is so full of life and joy in his own glory that the climax of his pleasure is to overflow in mercy to us. The ground of our confidence in the mercy of God is that he is a perfect Christian Hedonist. He delights above all things in his divine excellence and his happiness is so full that it expresses itself in the pleasure he has in sharing it with others.

Listen to the heartbeat of the perfect heavenly Hedonist in Jeremiah 32:40-41. Why does God do good? How does he go about the business of loving you? Listen:

I will take with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me. And I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness with all my heart and with all my soul.

God does good to you because he enjoys it so much! He pursues the business of loving you with all his heart and with all his soul. The happiness of God spilling over in joyful love is the foundation and example of Christian Hedonism.

I close with an invitation. These precious and astonishing promises of God's favor do not belong to everyone. There is a condition. It is not a condition of work or payment. An infinitely happy sovereign does not need your work and already owns all your resources. The condition is that you become a Christian Hedonist -- that you stop trying to pay or work for him or run from him and instead begin to seek with all your heart the incomparable joy of fellowship with the living God.

His delight is not in the strength of the horse
Nor his pleasure in the legs of man;
But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
In those who hope in his steadfast love. (Ps. 147:10-11)

The condition for inheriting all the promises of God is that all the hope for happiness you have pinned on yourself and your family and job and leisure you shift over to him. "The Lord takes pleasure in those who hope in his steadfast love." "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4).