



Happiness

As most of you know, I worked as a statistician, so I find it hard to resist a fascinating statistic:-

“In the year ending December 2017, 35.1% of people aged 16 and over in the UK reported their happiness yesterday as very high (9 and 10 out of 10).”
Office for National Statistics

Of course, a headline figure like this contains limited information, and likely raises lots of questions in your mind, e.g. what's the proportion in other countries? What was the percentage a decade ago? How many people rated their happiness as low? And so on. But what's probably at the top of your mind is, what's the equivalent figure for Northern Ireland? The answer, courtesy of the NISRA website, is 40.6%.

Respondents will have had many reasons for rating their happiness highly. How would *you* rate *your* happiness, on a scale of 1 to 10? The Bible gives the Christian various reasons for being happy, even in contexts which we wouldn't associate with such an emotion. Let's consider a number of these – I hope it will cheer you up!

Happiness in the forgiveness of our sins

At the start of Psalm 51, David is calling to the Lord for mercy, that his transgressions may be blotted out. He is clearly now distraught about the wrong he has done, for he realises that it has defiled him (v.2). His guilt haunts him, “my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). He recognises that the sinful deeds he has committed, terrible¹ as they are, are manifestations of something deeper, his very nature from birth (v.5). Notwithstanding the fact that he has greatly wronged one of his bravest officers, he confesses to God, “against thee, thee only, have I sinned” (v. 4). We can see that it is ultimately God Himself who is the offended party. How solemn are the implications of this! (See, for example, Revelation 21:27.)

By way of contrast, David exclaims at the start of Psalm 32, “Blessed² is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” The psalmist's joy is evident. He goes on to write, “thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (v. 5). In Romans 4, Paul takes up David's words, as he emphasises that Abraham's being reckoned righteous in God's sight was *not* based on Abraham's works, but on his belief in what God had said. Likewise, Paul explains, we too are reckoned righteous, through the death of Jesus our Lord (see Romans 4:23-25).

1. They included adultery and murder: see 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12.

2. The Hebrew word means 'happy'.

Happiness in the Saviour Himself

“Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help” (Deut. 33:29). “Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God” (Psalm 146:5). “Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee... Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee... O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee” (Psalm 84:4,5,12). The basis of the happiness expressed in these passages is Who the LORD is. Closely linked to this is what He has done. These thoughts are combined in Luke 1:46-55, which begins with Mary proclaiming, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour”.

Happiness in submission to the Lord

In Luke 11:28 we read, “blessed³ are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.” In the upper room, the Lord Jesus told his disciples, “if ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17). This meant humble, menial service to fellow believers.

In Acts 26:2, Paul, at that stage a prisoner, said, “I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee...”. No doubt one reason for this happiness was that Agrippa had good background knowledge (v.3 and v.27), which meant Paul wasn’t starting from scratch in explaining the Christian faith to him. However, I think that Paul was also happy simply because it was another opportunity to witness for Christ (verses 22-23).

Even being the object of divine discipline is cause for happiness: “Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O LORD” (Psalm 94:12). This seems paradoxical, but the point is that the chastening is part of a learning process, is of limited duration, and better days are ahead. James says, “we count them happy which endure” (5:11). He gives Job as the classic example. You have to wait till the last chapter of Job to see why.

Perhaps the best-known passage in Scripture about being pronounced ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’ is Matthew 5:3-12 (‘The Beatitudes’). The first seven descriptions of those who are happy are: the poor in spirit [humble-minded, *JB Phillips*]; they that mourn⁴; the meek; they which hunger and thirst after righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers. These descriptions are certainly not characteristic of most people, but they ought to be applicable to all those who know the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that in nearly every case, the reason for the happiness is in the future tense.

3. The Greek word could be translated ‘happy’.

4. Or lament.

Happiness in suffering for the Lord

The last beatitude in Matthew 5 is, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (v. 10). This turns our thinking upside down. (We might have thought it should say, “Blessed are they which escape persecution”.) If this life were all there was, then such thinking would be logical. But notice the Lord’s explanation – “for great is your reward in heaven” (v12). Peter (who himself knew he was to face a martyr’s death, John 21:18-19) echoes this beatitude twice in his first epistle (see 1 Peter 3:14 and 4:14). In the reference in chapter 4, he gives a present tense encouragement – “for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you”.

So, whatever your circumstances, have a Happy Christmas, and a Happy New Year.