

The Pursuit of Happiness

John M. Buttrey II

A great deal of our time in this life, is spent in the sometimes futile pursuit of happiness. Understandably, feelings of happiness are much more desired than feelings of sadness. In the pursuit of happiness we may take a trip across country to visit friends or family. In the pursuit of happiness we might purchase something new. Pursuing happiness may find us eating our favorite dessert, or being entertained in some way. At times, people pursue happiness with such a great degree of effort and expense, that it fills their life with stress, and actually robs them of happiness!

There is nothing wrong in wanting to be happy, as long as what makes us happy does not cause us to violate God's will (James 4:13-15). This is where we need to be very cautious as Christians. There are times when our pursuit of happiness may find us compromising our faith in some way. For example, pursuing happiness may cause us to forsake the weekly assembly of the saints (Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:25). In seeking to be happy, our ability to give to the Lord's work may be compromised (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Striving to be happy we may enter a spiritually unhealthy relationship. Far too many Christians, like the world, look first and foremost for a marriage partner who will make them happy, as opposed to someone who will help them get to heaven.

Ultimately, we must understand that the pursuit of happiness is more a worldly pursuit than one that is spiritual. Believe it or not, being a child of God is not about pursuing happiness. Yes, we can be happy as Christians, but we must realize that Jesus did not die on the cross so we could be happy. He died so we could be saved. We don't become Christians to live "happily ever after." Certainly, the thought of heaven should make us happy. Still, as Christians, there are far more important pursuits in which we should be engaged, if we want to live in heaven "ever after." For example, Paul told Timothy:

*For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things, you man of God, and **pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.***

1 Timothy 6:10-11 (Emphasis Mine)

In pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love and perseverance, one will have to say no to any number of things that the world would consider sources of happiness. The apostle speaks of the love of money as being a root of all sorts of evil. While money can make a lot of people happy, money cannot buy the things Paul encouraged Timothy (and us) to pursue.

To the Romans, Paul wrote:

*So then **we pursue** the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.*
Romans 14:19 (Emphasis Mine)

Oftentimes, what makes us happy is something that pleases self. However, pursuing the things that make for peace and the building up of others will often require us to surrender

our personal freedoms in Christ. (Rom. 14:1ff). Generally speaking, giving up a freedom does not make us happy.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul talked about the great pursuit of his life. After listing all of his impressive worldly and religious credentials (Phil. 3:4-6), things in which most would find happiness, Paul says he counted them as rubbish (Phil. 3:7-8). He then talked about his great pursuit:

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I **press on** so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I **press on** toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12-14 (Emphasis Mine. Note: the words translated "press on" are from the same Greek word rendered "pursue" in the other texts we have referenced).

The apostle's pursuit in life was not happiness, but rather being all he could be in Christ. Such a pursuit often deprived Paul of "happiness" as we typically think of it. His pursuit found him suffering often. He described very well the difficulties of his life as an apostle to the Corinthians:

*Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more **labors**, in far more **imprisonments**, **beaten** times without number, often in **danger of death**. Five times I received from the Jews **thirty-nine lashes**. Three times I was **beaten with rods**, once I was **stoned**, three times I was **shipwrecked**, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in **dangers** from rivers, **dangers** from robbers, **dangers** from my countrymen, **dangers** from the Gentiles, **dangers** in the city, **dangers** in the wilderness, **dangers** on the sea, **dangers** among false brethren; I have been in **labor and hardship**, through many **sleepless nights**, in **hunger** and **thirst**, often **without food**, in **cold and exposure**. Apart from such external things, there is the **daily pressure** on me of concern for all the churches.*

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (Emphasis Mine)

Paul describes experiences that were anything but happy. However, despite these happiness-robbing, difficult experiences, Paul could still rejoice in the Lord always (Phil. 4:4). The same is true for us. In pursuing a life of righteousness in Christ, we may not always find happiness, as the world typically thinks of happiness, but we can always rejoice! Let us therefore, like the apostle, pursue being all we can be in Jesus Christ. In this we will find something far greater than happiness, we will find joy (Phil. 4:4; James 1:2-4). In all our daily pursuits, let us remember these words of Jesus:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33