

HAPPINESS

*“Enjoy the Blessing!
Revel in the Goodness!”*

*All you who fear GOD, how blessed you are!
how happily you walk on his smooth straight road!
You worked hard and deserve all you've got coming.*

*Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!
Your wife will bear children as a vine bears grapes,
your household lush as a vineyard,
The children around your table
as fresh and promising as young olive shoots.*

*Stand in awe of God's Yes.
Oh, how he blesses the one who fears GOD!
Enjoy the good life in Jerusalem
every day of your life.*

*And enjoy your grandchildren.
Peace to Israel!*

*Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan,
is the gigantic secret of the Christian.*

G . K . CHESTERTON

There is a general assumption prevalent in the world that it is extremely difficult to be a Christian. While it is true that many don't completely disqualify themselves as "Christians," they do modify their claims: *ordinary* Christians they call themselves. They respect the church, worship fairly regularly, try to live decently. But they also give themselves somewhat generous margins to allow for the temptations and pressures put upon them by the world. To *really* be on the way of faith, take with absolute *seriousness* all that the Bible says—well, that requires a predisposition to saintliness, extraordinary willpower and an unspecified number of nameless austerities that they are quite sure they cannot manage.

But this is as far from the truth as the east is from the west. The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian. What is hard is to be a sinner. Being a Christian is what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption. The structure of this world was created by God so we can live in it easily and happily as his children. The history we walk in has been repeatedly entered by God, most notably in Jesus Christ, first to show us and then to help us live full of faith and exuberant with purpose. In the course of Christian discipleship we discover that without Christ we were doing it the hard way and that with Christ we are doing it the easy way. It is not Christians who have it hard, but non-Christians.

Promises and Pronouncements

Blessing is the word that describes this happy state of affairs. Psalm 128 features the word. The psalm begins with three descriptive promises: "All you who fear GOD, how blessed you are!" "You . . . deserve all you've got coming." "Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!" It concludes with three vigorous pronouncements: "Oh, how he blesses the one who fears GOD!" "Enjoy the good life in Jerusalem." "Enjoy your grandchildren." Sandwiched between those promises and pronouncements is an illustration of blessing: "Your wife will bear children as a vine bears grapes, your household lush as a vineyard, / The children around your table as fresh and promising as young olive shoots."¹

That all adds up to a good life—a life that is bounded on one side by promises of blessing, on the other side by pronouncements of blessing, and that experiences blessings between those boundaries.

The Bible is one long exposition of this blessing. In Genesis, God, having completed the work of creation by making mankind male and female, "blessed them" (Gen 1:28 RSV). He called Abraham and promised, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2 RSV). Each of the twelve tribes of Israel receives a special blessing which identifies its particular characteristic of vitality (Gen 49). David, who in so many ways embodied the intensities and joys of faith, was "richer in blessing than any other Israelite"—a long series of blessings, not without sorrow to be sure, but always brimming with life. Jesus, in his introduction to his Sermon on the Mount, identifies the eight key qualities in the life of a person of faith and announces each one with the word *blessed*. He makes it clear that the way of discipleship is not a reduction of what we already are, not an at-

tenuation of our lives, not a subtraction from what we are used to. Rather, he will expand our capacities and fill us up with life so that we overflow with joy. The conclusion of the Bible is that great, thunderous book of Revelation in which there are seven salvos of blessing (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). The blessings cannonade back and forth across the battlefield on which Christ completes his victory over sin and establishes his eternal rule. “The whole book stands in the framework of the blessing of those who attain to and keep the blessed revelation of the mysteries of God (1:3 confirmed in 22:7).”²

As we read this story of blessing and familiarize ourselves with the men and women who are experiencing God’s blessing, we realize that it is not something external or ephemeral. Not a matter of having a good day, not an occasional run of luck. It is an

inner strength of the soul—and the happiness it creates, . . . the vital power, without which no living being can exist. Happiness cannot be given to a person as something lying outside him. . . . The action of God does not fall outside but at the very center of the soul; that which it gives us is not something external, but the energy, the power of creating it. . . . The blessing thus comprises the power to live in its deepest and most comprehensive sense. Nothing which belongs to action and to making life real can fall outside the blessing. . . . Blessing is the vital power, without which no living being can exist.³

It is this that fills and surrounds the person who is on the way of faith.

Sharing in Life

The illustration that forms the center of the psalm shows how the blessing works: “Your wife will bear children as a vine bears

grapes, your household lush as a vineyard, / The children around your table as fresh and promising as young olive shoots.” The illustration is, as we would expect, conditioned by Hebrew culture, in which the standard signs of happiness were a wife who had many children and children who gathered and grew around the table: fruitful vine and olive shoots. This illustration is just that, an example that we need not reproduce exactly in order to experience blessing. (We, for instance, don’t try to have as many children as possible—or try to get them to stay at home for all their lives!) But the meaning is still with us: Blessing has inherent in it the power to increase. It functions by sharing and delight in life. “Life consists in the constant meeting of souls, which must share their contents with each other. The blessed gives to the others, because the strength instinctively pours from him and up around him. . . . The characteristic of blessing is to multiply.”⁴

John Calvin, preaching to his congregation in Geneva, Switzerland, pointed out that we must develop better and deeper concepts of happiness than those held by the world, which makes a happy life to consist in “ease, honours, and great wealth.”⁵ Psalm 128 helps us do that. Too much of the world’s happiness depends on taking from one to satisfy another. To increase my standard of living, people in another part of the world must lower theirs. The worldwide crisis of hunger that we face today is a result of that method of pursuing happiness. Industrialized nations acquire appetites for more and more luxuries and higher and higher standards of living, and increasing numbers of people are made poor and hungry. It doesn’t have to be that way. The experts on the world hunger problem say that there is enough to go around right now. We don’t have a production problem. We have the agricultural capability to produce enough food. We have the transportation technology to distribute the food. But we have a greed problem: if I don’t grab mine while I

can, I might not be happy. The hunger problem is not going to be solved by government or by industry but in church, among Christians who learn a different way to pursue happiness.

Christian blessing is a realizing that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." As we learn to give and to share, our vitality increases, and the people around us become fruitful vines and olive shoots at our tables.

The blessings that are promised to, pronounced upon and experienced by Christians do not of course exclude difficulties. The Bible never indicates that. But the difficulties are not inherent in the faith: they come from the outside in the form of temptations, seductions, pressures. Not a day goes by but what we have to deal with that ancient triple threat that Christians in the Middle Ages summarized under the headings of the world, the flesh and the devil: the world—the society of proud and arrogant humankind that defies and tries to eliminate God's rule and presence in history; the flesh—the corruption that sin has introduced into our very appetites and instincts; and the devil—the malignant will that tempts and seduces us away from the will of God. We have to contend with all of that. We are in a battle. There is a fight of faith to be waged.

But the way of faith itself is in tune with what God has done and is doing. The road we travel is the well-traveled road of discipleship. It is not a way of boredom or despair or confusion. It is not a miserable groping but a way of blessing.

Traveling by the Roads

There are no tricks involved in getting in on this life of blessing, and no luck required. We simply become Christians and begin the life of faith. We acknowledge God as our maker and lover and accept Christ as the means by which we can be in living relationship with God. We accept the announced and proclaimed

truth that God is at the center of our existence, find out how he has constructed this world (his creation), how he has provided for our redemption, and proceed to walk in that way. In the plain words of the psalm: "All you who fear GOD, how blessed you are! how happily you walk on his smooth straight road!"

"Fear GOD." *Reverence* might be a better word. *Awe*. The Bible isn't interested in whether we believe in God or not. It assumes that everyone more or less does. What it is interested in is the response we have to him: Will we let God be as he is, majestic and holy, vast and wondrous, or will we always be trying to whittle him down to the size of our small minds, insist on confining him within the boundaries we are comfortable with, refuse to think of him other than in images that are convenient to our lifestyle? But then we are not dealing with the God of creation and the Christ of the cross, but with a dime-store reproduction of something made in our image, usually for commercial reasons. To guard against all such blasphemous chumminess with the Almighty, the Bible talks of the fear of the Lord—not to scare us but to bring us to awesome attention before the overwhelming grandeur of God, to shut up our whining and chattering and stop our running and fidgeting so that we can really see him as he is and listen to him as he speaks his merciful, life-changing words of forgiveness.

"Walk on his smooth straight road." Not only do we let God be God as he really is, but we start doing the things for which he made us. We take a certain route; we follow certain directions; we do specified things. There are ethical standards to follow, there are moral values to foster, there are spiritual disciplines to practice, there is social justice to pursue, there are personal relationships to develop. None of it is difficult to understand. "Mere ethics," quipped Austin Farrer once, "call for no such august or mysterious explanation; next to plumbing, morality is

social convenience number one.”⁶

Because of the ambiguities of the world we live in and the defects in our own wills, we will not do any of this perfectly and without fault. But that isn't the point. The way is plain—walk in it. Keeping the rules and obeying the commands is only common sense. People who are forever breaking the rules, trying other roads, attempting to create their own system of values and truth from scratch, spend most of their time calling up someone to get them out of trouble and help repair the damage, and then ask the silly question “What went wrong?” As H. H. Farmer said, “If you go against the grain of the universe you get splinters.”

Some who read Psalm 128 will say, “Of course, that's the way it is with me. Doesn't everyone feel that?” Others will only be puzzled by how anyone could sing such a cheerful song in such a messed-up world. John Henry Newman once explained it this way: “If I want to travel north and all the roads are cut to the east, of course I shall complain of the roads. I shall find nothing but obstacles; I shall have to surmount walls, and cross rivers, and go round about, and after all fail of my end.” Such is the conduct of those who are trying to achieve some meaning in their lives, pursuing their right to happiness, but refusing to take the well-traveled roads that lead there. They are trying to get to Mount Zion but ignore all the signposts and compass readings and stubbornly avoid the trails as they bushwhack their way through wilderness. “Do you not see that they necessarily must meet with thwartings, crossings, disappointments, and failure?” They go mile after mile, watching for their destination but never sighting it. “And then they accuse religion of interfering with what they consider their innocent pleasures and wishes.” But religion is an inconvenience only to those who are traveling against the grain of creation, at cross-purposes with the way that leads to redemption.⁷

Everyone wants to be happy, to be blessed. Too many people are willfully refusing to pay attention to the One who wills our happiness and ignorantly supposing that the Christian way is a harder way to get what they want than doing it on their own. They are wrong. God's ways and God's presence are where we experience the happiness that lasts. Do it the easy way: "All you who fear GOD, how blessed you are! how happily you walk on his smooth straight road!"