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Rick Myatt

## WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID LIFE MIGHT GIVE YOU PEACHES

Lamentations 3:19-24

Laurie and I once knew a woman who was a divorced mother of two. At one point in our relationship with her she began to make some steps in a positive direction spiritually. We were praying for her and encouraging her, but then she came to a sudden halt. We weren't sure what happened, until finally she explained to Laurie. She had come to the place where she knew the issue was whether she would trust God with her life. She said, "I did that once before in my life, and my husband divorced me. I don't think I can go through any thing like that again." She perceived the fundamental issue. Will I trust God with my life? All of us will face the question, what if God lets something happen in my life that is going to make me unhappy?

### WE ALL SEEK TO BE HAPPY

The great scientist and thinker, Blaise Pascal, said, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception... This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves." He claimed that every single person who has ever lived seeks happiness. This is true without exception. There are zero human beings who don't care much one way or the other whether they are happy. Furthermore, he claimed, this drives every choice we make, every action we take. It is behind every single thing we do.

It doesn't take much reflection for us to admit this is true. We don't like being unhappy. We want to avoid that if at all possible. We do all we can to make ourselves happy. We may choose to do things that are not happy or go through unhappy circumstances. But behind those choices there is always a bigger goal that has to do with us being happy.

I had to perform a wedding this year that required that we travel out of town. We were put up in a hotel a half hour or so from the remote wedding site. We had half the day before the wedding to hang around the hotel, so we went for a long walk. We got back with enough time to each take a shower then change into our fancy wedding clothes. Laurie got cleaned up first and warned me that the hot water wasn't very hot. It was just somewhat warm. This was not true. When my turn came the hot water wasn't barely warm, it was cold. Really cold. I did not want to

take a cold shower. That did not make me happy. But it would have made me more unhappy to perform a wedding while smelling like a locker room.

Somewhere down at the bottom of it all, our motive in every single thing we do is that we might be happy. Ultimately when I brush my teeth, when I sleep at night, when I give a gift to my wife, when I exercise, when I do my job the best I can, I am seeking to be happy. This is as true of you as it is for me.

Pascal pointed out that sometimes people do the most perverse, even self-destructive things in their pursuit of happiness. He's right. I've been saddened by seeing people make choices that are guaranteed to drain them of real life. But somewhere in their minds they believe that those choices will produce more happiness for them. They might be as wrong as it is possible to be, but they do what they do because they think it will make them happier.

World famous actress, Audrey Hepburn, said much the same thing as Pascal in a different way. She said, "The most important thing is to enjoy your life – to be happy. That's all that matters." That's actually a scary statement. All that matters is that you be happy. What if what makes you happy is stealing other people's identities and robbing them blind? Apparently that is true of quite a few people because I get calls from them every day. What if what makes you happy is cheating on your spouse repeatedly? Is that all that matters? I would seriously take issue with her sentiment. But the point is, she is saying in her own way what Pascal said. And unfortunately there is a large portion of the human race that believes exactly what Hepburn said. The only thing that matters to them is that they be happy. This is a fundamental question every one must face. Is the only thing that matters that you be happy?

This reality introduces a fear into our lives. We fear that we will fail in our pursuit of happiness. We are afraid that we will not have what we have determined is absolutely essential to happiness. This is a major issue when it comes to living as a follower of Jesus, because we will go through times when we ask God to protect us from something that would make us unhappy, then that very thing happens. From then on we live with the fear that if we really trust God we might end up unhappy.

There are times when we run into a dilemma in which we think that if we trust God and obey him, if we do what he tells us to do, we will not get something we think is necessary for us to be happy. We experience that tug of war. Will I do what God

tells me to do even though I think it will make me unhappy? To do that runs directly contrary to our nature.

There is a story in the Bible that depicts this dilemma. It is in the book of Ruth. You probably know the story. Ruth was not a Hebrew. She was from Moab, one of Israel's pagan neighbor countries, one they were not on good terms with. But she married a Jewish man who emigrated to Moab during a famine in Israel. But her husband died while she was still fairly young, as did his brother and his father. Showing incredible loyalty she stayed with her mother-in-law and together they moved back to Israel. There they were destitute. The law back then allowed poor widows to follow the people who harvested crops and pick the leftovers for themselves. Ruth was doing that one day in the fields of a wealthy man named Boaz, who was a relative of her deceased husband. Boaz showed up that day as the harvest was taking place. According to Ruth 2:5 "Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, 'Who does that young woman belong to?'" Picture what was happening here. The employees are harvesting the crops and coming behind them are a number of widows and other poor people gleaning what they can from the field. Out of all those people Boaz spots Ruth and says, "Wow! Who is that? And is she married?" Let's be real clear here. Boaz was smitten. This is now the second Jewish man whose eye Ruth had captured. Remember that Jewish men generally wanted nothing to do with women from Moab. I feel quite confident that Ruth was a hottie. But things got a bit complicated. There was a law about widows. Women couldn't own land. So a woman either had to have a husband or son who could own the land. Ruth had neither. However, the law was that next in line in the family should marry the young widow and hopefully father a son with her. That son would be the heir of her dead husband and inherit his land. There was a guy ahead of Boaz in the line of succession. So Boaz met with him and told him he could buy the land and get Ruth. But in Ruth 4:6 the guy, called the guardian redeemer, said "I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." That was not precisely true. He could have, but he didn't want to. It actually was his God given responsibility. But he was torn between what God told him to do and the fear of being unhappy if he did so. He was afraid it would cost his own sons part of their inheritance if he did it and they would not be happy with him. He didn't see how he could live with that. He had a choice between doing what God said and maybe being unhappy, and doing what he thought would preserve happiness for him. Out of fear of unhappiness he said, "I'm out." In doing so he missed out on Ruth, which it appears was a big miss, and eventually on being an ancestor of Israel's Messiah, an even bigger miss. So that

honor that went to Boaz, who married Ruth the moment the other guy said, “No thanks.”

What exactly is happiness? It is not that easy to define, but we do know it when we have it. I believe it is a composite emotion. It has some essential elements. One of those is peace. We will never be happy if we do not have peace. It is absolutely foundational for happiness. Another key element is gladness.

So we go around constantly motivated to seek happiness. The weird thing is, happiness is curiously rare among us. Ernest Hemingway said, “Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know.” He believed that if you were intelligent you were going to be unhappy. The only way to be happy is to be unintelligent. Mark Twain topped that statement. He said, “Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.” As he saw it the only way to be happy is to be insane! This is a really curious thing. If those guys are anywhere close to the truth, every single one of us is obsessed with happiness, but few people actually have it.

This matches up with what we see in the world, where there are countless books and many studies being done all on the subject of how to be happy. We sense if we’re not happy we are missing out on what life is all about. We’re afraid of missing happiness. Let’s see if we can figure where the disconnect happens.

## WE THINK THERE IS A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN CIRCUMSTANCES AND HAPPINESS

Bob Dylan, the famous songwriter and singer, in an interview was asked if he had experienced real happiness. He said, “We all do at certain points, but it’s like water – it slips through your hands...How can a person be happy if he has misfortune?” In his answer he just stated what we all think is true. It is impossible to be happy when you have unhappy circumstances. The presumption is that happiness can only occur when we have happy circumstances. All of us believe this to be true. We all think that there is some set of circumstances that we could somehow obtain why then we would be happy. And we are even more certain that there are a number of things that if they happen to us there is no way we could be happy.

Several years ago Laurie and I met a man somewhat younger than me who was a believer. He told us some of his story. Several years earlier his wife had a brain aneurysm that burst and she was rushed to the hospital. Victims of such an incident usually don’t survive. However, she did, but not without some damage to her brain. It changed her. Her personality was completely different. And unfortunately

though she can mostly function, she doesn't do it very well. The woman this man married was gone forever. In her place was someone who didn't have any of the things that drew him to her, a woman for whom he mostly has to care with zero expectation of any kind of return. How is someone supposed to be happy in that situation?

Years ago I was a part of an ordination council for a truly godly man who had been in ministry for quite a number of years. Though not new, he was only now seeking ordination. In the process of our interviewing him we learned that he had a rare blood disorder. This condition is inevitably fatal. There is no treatment, no cure. We asked him how he deals with it. He said, "I don't know how long I have to live. But I want to make sure I make the most I have of whatever time I have. I want to live each day for the kingdom of God." He died a couple of years later. How is one to be happy with that kind of circumstance?

We are all going to experience hardship, disappointment, loss and difficulty in our lives. Job 5:7 says we are, "born to trouble as sparks fly upward." In John 16:33 Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." What we want is for life to always be pleasant, for it to be one long string of successes. Generally we think that is what makes for a happy life. We think that because when we experience hurt, disappointment or loss it feels bad. We aren't happy, and when we have a big success we feel very happy.

But we need to pay attention to what these passages from the Bible say. Have you ever been to a bonfire or sat by a campfire and made s'mores? Which way did the sparks, the burning embers, go? They go up. That's because they are hot, and heat rises. That's an invariable principle of physics. Job tells us that the day that physical principle no longer holds true will be the day that we humans are not born for trouble. In other words, the human condition includes trouble.

Jesus said that in this world we will have trouble. It is guaranteed. There are health and wealth gospel people who insist it is God's will for you to never have trouble but only health and success. Apparently they don't agree with Jesus. Whose claim do you trust, that of Jesus or that of the health and wealth people? Personally I'm going with Jesus.

If it is true that happiness stems mostly from our circumstances, that means there is going to be a lot of unhappiness in our lives. Happiness will be fleeting at best, and

mostly out of reach. Moments of happiness will be rare and fleeting. Is it possible, though, that happiness comes from something else entirely and is not solely determined by our circumstances, thus it is possible to be happy even when we are experiencing less than ideal circumstances?

The most popular class at Yale University is Psychology 157, which has been offered the past few years. The title of the class is “Psychology and the Good Life.” It is really about the psychology of happiness. A quarter of the students at Yale have enrolled in this class. The professor who teaches the class, Laurie Santos, points out that more than half the students at Yale have sought mental health care from the university. This suggests that despite the fact they are at the top, highly successful young people who are the cream of the crop, they are not finding happiness. Ms. Santos says, “our intuitions about what will make us happy, like winning the lottery or getting a good grade, are totally wrong.” In other words, our intuition that good circumstances will make us happy, is not correct. We need to learn from the prophet Jeremiah.

#### JEREMIAH HAD TERRIBLE CIRCUMSTANCES

In verses 19-20 Jeremiah wrote, “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall, I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.” He wasn’t saying he remembered it in the sense that he recalled a time long ago when he went through a really tough time. The way he was using it the term “remember” means something along the lines of “feel it and reflect on it.” He was talking about experiencing the bitterness, the gall and the affliction that dominated his circumstances when he wrote.

Jeremiah was given a tough assignment. He was to tell Israel that they had been consistently disobedient to God and that now the bill for their bad choices was coming due. He had to preach that God was going to judge them by having a foreign superpower invade them and ruin them. He said they would once again go into exile for decades. He claimed that at that point it was too late to head this off. That judgment was coming and nothing could stop it.

You can imagine that this was not an especially popular message. No one wants to hear that they are so bad God is going to step in and judge them immediately. No one wants to hear they are going to be conquered and their land destroyed and many of them killed because they have earned it, and that nothing they did could keep that from happening. But that is what Jeremiah was supposed to tell them. He said at times that ministry was so painful for him it burned in his soul. People hated

him. They called him names and rejected him and even tried to kill him. But when he wrote the words in this passage everything he said had proven true. Israel had been ruined by the Babylonians, and many Israelis were going into exile there.

You might think Jeremiah was pleased because he could say, “I told you so. I warned you. You should have listened to me.” But he took no delight in that. Any parent who deeply loves their child who has disregarded wise parental advice, had it blow up in their face and then experienced painful disappointment or hurt, knows that the parent mainly feels sadness and empathy for the hurting child.

Jeremiah loved the people of Israel. He took no joy in being right. He wasn’t happy about being vindicated, because his people, the people he loved, suffered horribly. It wasn’t about being right, it was about pain, hardship, death and loss for him. He is called “The Weeping Prophet,” and Lamentations is part of the reason. He lamented what happened to his people. There was precisely zero happiness in all that happened when Israel was conquered.

Listen to Jeremiah’s words earlier in this chapter. In verse 1 he wrote, “I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord’s wrath.” In verses 5-6 he wrote of the Lord, “he has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness long those long dead.” In verse 17 he said, “I have been deprived of peace. I have forgotten what prosperity is.” In 5:15 he wrote, “Joy is gone from our hearts. Our dancing has turned into mourning.” So you’re saying you’re not happy? You can picture him walking through the rubble of what had once been the city he loved, the city he knew as the city of God. There was no semblance of a city now, just ruins filled with way too many corpses. Too many people he knew personally were dead, and the ones who weren’t faced an unknown but frightening future. Jeremiah’s situation was as far from happy as it is possible to get.

#### JEREMIAH HAD REASON TO REJOICE

As we have seen there is a great deal in this book about the grief of Jeremiah. In fact the book is filled with it. The major theme of the book is mourning. Yet right in the middle of it there is a section that shines like the beacon of a lighthouse on a dark night. After mentioning how his soul is down cast at the end of verse 21 Jeremiah said in verse 22, “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.” The word “yet” is important. What Jeremiah next wrote about was in total contrast to what he had been saying, and really to the tenor of this entire book. In the midst of the gloom there was light. In the midst of the grief there was hope.

What powerful words follow, some of my favorite in the Old Testament. Because of the great love of the Lord they were not consumed. Israel continued to exist for one reason and one reason alone. It was because of God's loyal, merciful, kind love. They deserved to be destroyed, but the Lord's love, his commitment to them as his people, meant they would go on as a people.

Jeremiah says God's compassions never fail, that in fact, they are new every morning. In other words, there are new examples of God's compassion for his people every single day. It might have been tempting for someone to say, "How can you talk about God's compassion? Look at us! Look at what he has done to us? Where is his compassion in all of this death and devastation?"

But Jeremiah's point is that what they deserved was annihilation. God could have and should have wiped them out completely. Why didn't he? It wasn't because they were so good, so precious and so deserving of kindness. It was because he felt compassion for them. Jeremiah spoke a lot about the amazing fact that as part of her judgment Israel would go into exile, but God wouldn't leave them there. The normal course of events was for people groups to go into exile and never come back, usually to just disappear from the world scene. But in his compassion God not only spared some of Israel, he promised he would sustain them and even bring them back some day. That's why he wrote, "Great is your faithfulness."

We have been taking care of Ella and Cara for the past week. Yes, we're exhausted, but we're happy. It is so much fun. On Friday we took the kids to the Pumpkin Palooza up on Paloma's Airport Road. They have several bounce houses, a huge inflatable slide and a small pen with some goats, a pig and a chicken. Ella went full speed ahead on the bounce houses and the slide. She loved it. She went from one to another at warp speed. It was around 84 degrees and after some time her face was flushed and she was obviously getting overheated. We had been there for quite a while and we had to leave because we had to meet Anna's mom for lunch. So I told Ella it was time to stop. She didn't want to stop. She was having too much fun. But I told her we had to go. She needed to cool down, and she also needed to go home for a nap. She decided to ignore me. Now I had a problem. She made it clear she was going to assert her will and be happy, meaning defy me. I had a problem. I'm Yapaw, not a parent. How was I going to deal with this? I went back to basics. Time for consequences. I told Ella if she insisted on staying then we would not ever go back and play there. She would lose that opportunity.



Fortunately that did the trick. Whew. I was glad it worked because plan B didn't exist. It seemed to Ella that I was taking away her fun and happiness, when in fact I was looking out for her well being and had to give consequences to do it. She still doesn't understand that, but it is true nevertheless. And so it is with God, who looks out for our good even when it means he has to bring some consequences to our lives. Even those consequences are a function of his compassion. Israel had their grievous consequences because their rebellion against God was grievous, but God loved them still and had compassion for them.

Jeremiah had reason to rejoice because, as verse 24 says the Lord was his portion. What does that mean? Think of an inheritance. Each member of the family would get a portion of the inheritance. That portion would be the most valuable thing they had. Jeremiah was saying the most valuable thing he had, the part that came to him, was the Lord. Because the Lord is good, compassionate, wise, kind and loving, this is the best it is possible to have. That's why he could rejoice.

What it is important for us to see is that in the midst of sadness and loss, these are words of peace and hope. In other words, Jeremiah was okay. He was happy even in the midst of his sadness, because he knew that what happened was necessary and that it would have a good outcome. In other words, he had hope.

I submit to you that happiness, that sense of peace, acceptance and even joy and hope, actually can exist when our circumstances themselves are the farthest thing from happy. Real happiness is not threatened or obliterated by unhappy events. Of course unhappy events do not make us feel good, but we can still have peace and joy in the middle of them. In fact, the joy of the Lord, his happiness in us, is our strength, the thing that enables us to stand firm, to keep persevering to actually care for others when there nothing fun or happy about our circumstances.

### APPLICATION

What will enable us to be happy even when we can see little reason to be happy about our circumstances? What can help us so we don't have to be afraid of some terrible thing happening to us and ruining us so that we are miserable?

### CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AND GOODNESS

Jeremiah shows us this. Observe that in this passage where there is hope in the middle of all the gloom what he focuses on. He wrote about God's great compassion, about his faithfulness and about his compassions that are new every morning. He was stating his faith in the fact that God loved Israel, that he was

seeking their best and that even in these painful circumstances there was goodness and hope.

Early this week as we were giving Ella and Cara a meal. We had some canned peaches that we gave to Ella, but she had determined that this was an evil scheme. She was certain that those peaches were clearly the most unappetizing thing that she had seen in all of her 2 years and 10 months of life. Surely if one of them merely touched her tongue she would spontaneously combust and be destroyed. She had an epic meltdown about the peaches. We tried to calm her and assure her that they were actually delicious and that she would love them. To no avail. The only way to end the storm was to remove that offending fruit from her sight. She had a settled attitude that there was no way she could ever be happy again if she was forced to eat those peaches. Somehow, I don't even recall how, we put the peaches in a different container and got her to at least try them. She loved them. In short order she devoured the entire serving of them. I then explained to her that she needed to learn to trust that Nana and Yapaw have great love for her, that our compassions are new every morning. Because of this we only give her what is good. If she just trusted in the obvious character and love of Nana and Yapaw, which she truly sees every day of her life and knows is true and real, then she could have reasoned, "I don't see how I can like this offensive fruit, but I will trust in the love of Nana and Yapaw." If she had only done that there would have been no drama, just peace and happiness.

So it is for us. Happiness is founded in peace and confidence that all will be well because God cares for us. That can never come from some happy circumstance. When we try to ground our sense of well being, our joy and peace, in a circumstance, all we get is fear, for we know at any moment that good thing could be torn away from us and our dancing turned into sadness.

Our happiness must be solidly grounded in the character of God. It is found in his goodness, his wisdom, his love, his faithfulness, his grace and mercy, his kindness, and his sovereignty. These are the things about which we can be happy whatever may come our way.

#### HAVING THE LORD AS OUR PORTION

A big reason why Jeremiah could have an attitude of hope even while experiencing sadness was stated in verse 24. "I say to myself, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him." Having the Lord was so good that it gave him reason to be joyful, at peace and hopeful even in a time when his situation was truly unhappy.

It is possible to have one thing that is so good and happy, that it gives you a boost of joy even though something else that is happening is not so great. In other words, the good thing is so much better and bigger than the sad thing that you can deal with the sad thing and still be happy.

Here's a trivial example. Earlier this year I had to have a biopsy done of my prostate gland. No one does a biopsy to find out if you really are as healthy as you appear to be. They do a biopsy because they are concerned about the possibility of cancer. In other words, a biopsy is never a happy thing. It usually isn't exactly a lot of fun either. The phrase "a good time was had by all" does not apply. I guess compared to maybe having surgery without the aid of an anesthetic it wasn't that bad, but let's just say I'd go a long way out of my way to avoid a repeat. Of course after the biopsy comes the wait. It takes several days for the lab to determine the results. Right at the end of that time I got notification on my bank statement that I had received a royalty for one of the books I'd written. You might think that's cause for rejoicing. It wasn't. The royalty was for 70 cents. Mostly I think that's kind of funny and I make light of it. But it kind of mocks me. Oooh, some writer you are. Wow, if you got a royalty check like that every month, why after a year you'd have enough money to buy two fish tacos at Rubio's. It just makes for a little dig at me that says, "Hey, Myatt, as a writer...you suck." It didn't ruin my day. But it is slightly disappointing. But the day I got that bank statement my doctor called. He said the biopsy was benign. No cancer. That was really good news. Terrific news. It was such good news that I found I wasn't annoyed at all by the dumb royalty. The whole royalty thing was just totally eclipsed by the good news about the biopsy.

So it can be with God. Having him love us, be present with us, giving us hope and confidence for the future, is such a good thing that it can overcome the bad news that will happen at times. It is a source of joy, of happiness, that is greater than any unhappy event that may befall us.

Jeremiah wrote in verse 24, "I say to myself, the Lord is my portion." The words "I say to myself" are important. Jeremiah had to do some self talk. In other words, in the middle of all the grief and loss he was experiencing, he had to say this to himself. He had to remind himself that the Lord was his portion. We will have to do the same thing. The bad news comes, and we are grieved. But that's when we say to ourselves, the Lord is my portion, and we are saved.

