RESTING IN THE HAPPY GOD

1 Timothy 1:11; Psalm 135; Jeremiah 32:39-41; Selected Texts (NASB)

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As I launched out into ministry in the early eighties I jumped in with both feet, I dove into the deep end of the pool, and I put my nose to the grindstone. That was how I had done mostly everything thus far, and it had almost always worked. I was very idealistic about how my ministry would go, and not very well informed of the normal challenges.

The normal preaching and teaching expectation at that time was morning sermon, evening sermon, prayer meeting devotional, and often a Sunday school class. Loads of prep to do! I bore down on it with all my might. As I dug into the work I discovered that the task of helping lost people come to Christ does not submit to just bearing down and trying harder. I also discovered that church health, growth, and change does not simply happen because the pastor is expending lots of energy.

This became a vicious circle where my efforts would not bear the fruit for which I prayed, and so I just worked harder. It started to affect my health and soul. One time we were sitting in a restaurant trying to relax, and I felt shooting pains down my neck and shoulder. I burst out in a whole body sweat. I ended up on the floor of the restaurant jammed between the tables until the ambulance corps people pulled me out and took me to the ER—where nothing was found wrong with my heart. Then there was the time my entire digestive system shut down and I ended up on the floor of the bedroom in the middle of the night with excruciating abdominal pain. Adding to the misery was that my own ambulance crew with which I served came to schlep me to the ER where I was treated and released.

While your experience of life and ministry may not look exactly like mine, I know that you know the same tough discovery process and the same sense of stress and distress.

This was the condition I was in when I went to General Council where our Alliance President, Dr. Paul Bubna, had planned the whole week around the glory of God. I was like a man dying of thirst in the desert finally crawling to the oasis. President Bubna also invited Dr. John Piper to be the keynote speaker on that subject, and he preached a set of deeply life-giving sermons. I went home and phoned the book division of Bethel Baptist Church and said: “How many Piper books are there? Please put them all in a box and send them to me.”

That Council and those book studies fundamentally changed my approach to life and ministry. It remains a battle to live in these wonderful truths, but that fight is a vast improvement over expending all of my energy trying to follow a ministry plan which can never work. Let’s look together at some of what I learned about God and then we will derive some crucial applications.

1. GOD IS HAPPY

The first reality is that God is happy. Paul wrote to Timothy that he was ministering **“…according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted”** (1 Timothy 1:11 NASB). The word “blessed” is *makarios* in Greek and is the same word as the Lord used when he taught the Beatitudes, such as **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”**

I remember the first time I saw *makarios* translated as “happy” in a Bible paraphrase. My immediate thought was: that’s not nearly enough! And so it isn’t. Blessed means so much more. John Piper pushed this translation in his book *The Pleasures of God*. He did it to force us to think. So I am using it for the same reason. A second reason is that the word blessed sounds like a passive verb, as if God is waiting for someone to bless him, and then he will be happy. But the self-existent God does not need anyone to make him blessed. The word happy sounds more like something which God possesses—and he does. We do not need to give blessing to him for him to have it, though we should give it to him anyway. As the Father spoke from heaven over Jesus at his baptism: **“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”** (Matthew 3:17). When was the Father pleased in the Son? Always. This source of happiness is eternal, immutable, and indestructible.

The same word for happy is also explicitly used of Christ, where Paul exhorts Timothy to **“…keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time-- He who is the blessed [*makarios*] and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords…”** (1 Timothy 6:14-15). So we will keep the word happy for this study, even though it is a burr in our saddle.

We desperately need to know this about our God! We have an eternal loving relationship with a God who is satisfied in his own perfections. He is not waiting for us to satisfy him. He is not perpetually angry at us, leaving us waiting for punishment at any moment. Our God is happy, joyful, pleased, and, yes, blessed. The greatest pleasure any human can have is to know this God.

2. GOD REJOICES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES

Secondly, we need to know that God rejoices to accomplish his purposes, and because he is omnipotent, he always does. Psalm 135 teaches us this great truth: **“For I know that the LORD is great /And that our Lord is above all gods. /Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, /In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps”** (Psalm 135:5-6). The Hebrew word for “pleases” is *chafets*, which is also translated “good pleasure” in the noun form. Sometimes a waiter or waitress will ask about my food selection: What’s your pleasure? And I will answer something like: burger, fries, and a salad, please. My pleasure is also my purpose, because I plan to eat my meal and enjoy it. *Chafets* welds joy and action. This is how God is happy, at all times and everywhere.

Psalm 135 is jammed with things which are God’s good pleasure. It pleases him to receive praise and glory from his people, to choose Israel, to sustain all creation, to judge the enemies of Israel, to give Israel the promised land, to glorify his name on the earth, to discipline his people, to show compassion to them, and to exalt himself over every idol and idol worshiper. It is illuminating to notice that when this psalm says: **“Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD; Praise Him, O servants of the LORD!”** (Psalm 135:1), God has himself inspired the psalmist to write those words! So it pleased God to purpose his own praise and glorification. This would be egregious egotism for any created being, but it is the only possible appropriate thing for a God who is the summation of all that is worthy.

This marrying of pleasure and purpose is also clearly seen in the New Testament. Paul wrote such mammoth thoughts about God to the Ephesians: **“He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth”** (Ephesians 1:9-10). The words “kind intention” are also translated “good pleasure” and represent the Greek word *eudokia* in the noun form, or *eudokew* in the verb form. In this verse we learn the pleasure of God to establish and accomplish the entire plan of redemption, sweeping through all history and culminating in the summing up of all things in Christ. Earlier in this same chapter the word *eudokia* is used to say that it is God’s good pleasure to predestine us to adoption in Christ, to the praise of the glory of his grace.

God is unspeakably happy to plan and achieve our salvation through faith in Christ. He rejoices beyond measure when even one lost sheep is found, and angels above rejoice in harmony with him. This is the eternity into which you and I are invited. This is the God who is at work in our lives. He is not a God who only grudgingly helps us, or who flubs his response to our prayers. He always completes what he intends to do, and he is happy in the doing.

3. GOD’S HAPPINESS IS COMPLEX

Thirdly, we need to understand that God’s happiness is complex. This will help us with the question of how God can be said to be happy when there are people starving, getting sick, and being abused. And closer to home, how can God be happy when terrible things are happening to me and my family?

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian captivity to a people who were being stomped on by Nebuchadnezzar. That suffering was not random but part of God’s judgment on the rebellious and sinful nation Israel. God’s word was given through the prophet to people who were beginning to turn back to their Lord: **“Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’”** (Ezekiel 33:11).

This is a foundational statement of God’s sorrow in the physical and spiritual death of evil people. He takes no pleasure in it, in spite of what some theologians have said, especially about God in the Old Testament. By contrast, God takes immense pleasure in the repentance of those who turn from sin and unbelief and turn to him in faith.

But to complicate the picture, the Lord spoke an apparently contradictory word of warning to Israel just prior to the nation entering the land of promise: **“It shall come about that as the LORD delighted over you to prosper you, and multiply you, so the LORD will delight over you to make you perish and destroy you; and you will be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it”** (Deut. 28:63). We learn that it is a delight to the Lord to bless and prosper his people. What is shocking to hear is that he says it is also a delight for him to punish and destroy Israel should they be wicked and faithless. There have been many theologians and church leaders who have tried to solve this conundrum by insisting that we should reject and ignore the Old Testament, and that we should believe that God is only capable of love and nurture, and never judgment.

Let me offer several ways to understand how God can delight in both things, even at the same time. First, the destruction of the wicked and faithless brings delight that his righteousness is vindicated. It boots nothing to insist that God must be affirming to those who hate him. Second, God delights to defeat his enemies because it vindicates his holy power over those who set themselves against him. This is the climax of the book of Revelation, for example. Third, both of these actions bring glory to him, and God delights in his glorification. We err greatly and dishonor God when we try to oversimplify him. There is no more complex being in the universe.

I think we can all relate to this complexity, that happiness and sorrow can exist at the same time in simultaneous layers. For example, when my father passed away at age ninety-one I grieved. I was also happy to have been blessed by a dad who stood by his family over the long haul, and that he produced medicines which have improved and saved many people’s lives. I was happy that he was released from a punishing dementia which extended over many years. And I was grieved that the dementia stole him from me long before his body died. I am confident that every one of us has experienced a similar complicated mix. It should not be a surprise that we do because people created in God’s image are like him in that respect.

4. GOD’S HAPPINESS BRINGS PROFOUND REST TO HIS PEOPLE

This complex layering of God’s good pleasure points to a precious reality for those who trust him, namely, that it provides profound rest for his people. I will point out three aspects of this rest.

First, the fact that God always does his good pleasure gives us inner peace. To the Israelites who were languishing in captivity in Babylon he said through Jeremiah: “**‘I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul.’ For thus says the LORD, ‘Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them’”** (Jeremiah 32:41-42 NAU).

This is the logic which overtops every earthly trial and suffering. While these words were specifically spoken to Israel in the context of the first covenant, Christians can receive the same promise in the context of the New Covenant: God always does his good pleasure, and his good pleasure is to do us good.

If your life or ministry is not producing the results for which you have prayed, keep praying and working—but rest. God is at work to do good both for you and for many. Strive, like the Apostle Paul, but do not consume yourself with worry. Refuse the lie of the devil that everything depends on you. What if you are not healed of an ailment, or have no solution for financial issues, or can find no reconciliation for relational breakdowns? Keep seeking God, seeking wisdom, and seeking help—but rest. It is God’s good pleasure to do you good. And that is the source of a peace which cannot be taken from us.

Secondly, if God always does his good pleasure, and he is pleased to do us good, we can have freedom from fear. Isaiah bolstered Israel by prophesying that God was coming to save them from their enemies, both in the present and in the last days: **“Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. Say to those with anxious heart, ‘Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you’”** (Isaiah 35:3-4).

We have so many fears! What if my ministry fails? What if the stock market crashes? What if I fall in sin? What if I cannot provide for my family? What if, what if, what if, what if? Your brain and the devil will conspire to give you as many fears as possible. To this Jesus said: **“Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows”** (Luke 12:6-7). Name your worst fear. You can rest in Jesus.

Thirdly, if God always does his good pleasure, and he is watching over us, we can take faith-risks for his kingdom. The first and biggest risk is whether to invest our whole lives in the Lord and his work. Can you and I relax our grip on the absurd theory that we are best off when we hold tightly to running our own lives? Paul wrote to the Romans: **“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship”** (Romans 12:1).

Recently I viewed a video update from international workers Mark and Cinda Wood whom I met several years ago in a country I shall call M-word. The video showed them and their team with fifteen people from an Unpronounceable Region in the far west of M-word, standing on a vast empty field barren of trees and plant life. The people of that place ride horses, keep livestock, and move their portable dwellings with the seasons. There are no roads, no fast food restaurants, no doctors, no car mechanics, and no grocery stores. It’s just Mark and Cinda and their team, the people of the land, and Jesus in the middle of nowhere. That’s a faith-filled risk! And they praised God that one woman came to know the Lord.

What remarkable act of faith, what bold ministry, what determined act of faithfulness is waiting for us to place our lives on his altar and rest in his good pleasure? As missionary martyr Jim Elliott wrote in his journal while preparing to head to the Waodani tribal people: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” It is God’s delight in his indestructible purpose which gives us the ability to do just that.

Knowing these things does not make them easy. Let me close with three very personal words. First, don’t condemn yourself for not feeling peaceful in the face of unresolved challenges to life and faith.

Second, just trust God like a baby no matter what. Seek total inward reliance on God even when nothing is going your way.

Third, look for the good thing which God is doing. Go on a blessing hunt, even when an overwhelming sorrow has come your way. God has promised that even when times are hard for us that he is doing a good thing. There is no promise that we will always discover what it is.

And fourth, look to the promised future of good things in the Lord. If nothing else goes your way on this earth, you can trust that the blessings of God’s presence are reserved in heaven for you. People who believe that live differently than those who do not.

It makes God happy to do all of his will without fail. And in that, we have rest.

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