

This Is Happiness

Psalm 84

August 25, 2024

Psalm 84 is a worship song: “My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” It is also a happy song; the word happy is used three times in 12 short verses. It makes Bible scholars happy to study the historical context of the original audience, and there is general consensus that Psalm 84 was sung by pilgrims on their way up to the Temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 84 was a happy, hiking song.

This delights me, for I’m reminded of family camping trips with our friends when children and children at heart would pass the time and miles on the trail by singing, such as “The other day... I met a bear...”

I’m happy on a walk in the woods, and I’m not alone. When Celia in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* said, “I like this place, and willingly, I could waste my time in it,” she was referring to the forest, not the internet.

As I spent time this week with Psalm 84, I learned that the primitive root of the Hebrew word for happy meant “go forward.” Happy hiking!

Yet, this past week I also spent prayer time with those who struggle to walk: Rachel had knee replacement surgery, Mark continues to recover from his knee surgery, and Brad was hospitalized with an infection after his knee injection. Additionally, I regularly hold those in the light who have limited mobility—think of Hope, Jack, and Sue! We do not want to limit happiness but extend to all. If happiness, then, describes movement, then there must also be a metaphorical aspect.

That’s exactly the move in Psalm 84:5, “Happy are those in whose hearts are the highways to Zion.” Happiness might be a walk in the woods; it might also be an inward journey of self-introspection.

Before he left to serve as pastor of the little Presbyterian church in Saxapahaw, my buddy Jack gifted me with the novel *This Is Happiness*. Niall Williams wrote, “If you could stop for a heartbeat in, not all, but many moments of your life and think, ‘This is happiness,’ you would realize that it is true simply because you are alive to say it.” Notice the caveat: No one is happy all the time. There’s nothing happy about trauma, violence, or grief.

I think this notion of happiness is rooted in the faith that life remains a gift. And our perspective on this grace matters.

We know our friend Dawn Landes as a singer-songwriter, and this month she wrote a beautiful essay in Orion magazine. Dawn remembers buying her current house a few years ago because the lawn reminded her of a fairy garden. It was carpeted with lush green moss and decorated with boulders like couches. Of course, the fairies would not do all the yardwork! So, Dawn found herself slipping outside with the monitor as her baby napped so that she could weed. The work is never over; the weeds come back. Yet, Dawn wrote that she didn't mind the chore; she knew that the weeds she placed in the little red wagon would become compost, food for the soil, or perhaps be snatched by a bird and woven into her nest so that she could raise her babies. Dawn called this perspective "small miracles versus small resentments." I think she tells us about finding happiness.

I also appreciated that her mention of birds resonated with Psalm 84, which imagines sparrows and swallows making their nests in the temple. Both Jesus and Mahalia Jackson sang that God's eye is on the sparrow, meaning there is love for each and for all. Again, life is a gift.

I think this is the idea behind the final verse in Psalm 84: "Happy is everyone who trusts in the Lord." Not that anyone is happy all the time or that you are unfaithful if you are not happy. But we can trust that the Lord of Love will make all things new. And along the journey of life, wherever it takes us, whether mountaintops or valleys of the shadow of death, we can find shimmers and glimmers of grace—that is, happiness.

A happy thing for me is my recent discovery of the poet Chris Anderson, a retired English professor and Catholic deacon living in Oregon. I reached out to Chris, and he graciously agreed to grant permission for me to read the title poem of his book of poetry, *Love Calls Us Here*. It's a poetic narrative of what I've been trying to say about finding happiness.

Love Calls Us Here

We spent the day at the beach and went out to eat,
but the restaurant was crowded and they had to seat us
at the bar, and as we waited we watched the bartender,
a young woman, running back and forth trying
to keep up with her orders. And there was a man
at the bar, an old man, drinking by himself, and when

she asked as she hurried by how he was doing, he said this was the day his wife had died, the year before, and this was her favorite place. And I remember now how the bartender turned, and put down her tray, and went over and talked with that old man for a moment, how she listened, and in my mind her kindness and the old man's grief and the mystery of death and all the stories and the sadness in that crowded place seem to rise up and come together, and it's a warm summer night, and the sun is setting on the water, and the bright waves are coming in and going out, darkening as they break.

Whether you are in a restaurant or your yard, on a hiking trail or even in the hospital, Immanuel God is with you—day in and day out, the ebb and flow of time. God is walking with you in your heart of hearts.