

## **Of All Men Most Miserable**

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1 Cor. 15:19)

What is the motive for all actions? In a now fairly well-known quote, the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

Pascal is probably right. Humans seek happiness. Call it pleasure, or fulfillment, or satisfaction, or gladness, everyone who lives seeks happiness. All the choices you make add up to your pursuit of where you think the happiest possible life for you lies. What you are pursuing, what you spend your money on, how you spend your time, is a statement of where you think happiness lies.

But there are degrees of happiness. Some happiness is intense but short-lived. Some happiness is mild but longer lasting. Some forms are temporary and some are permanent. Some people are very successful in their happiness pursuit, others are defeated.

It might surprise you to learn that the Bible does not frown upon this pursuit of happiness. In fact, it acknowledges that this is what people are about: seeking the fulfillment of desire. It even appeals to this sense of desire for happiness by giving promises of good things, promises of reward, and conversely, warnings and threats of unhappiness. The Bible is not against happiness.

But the Bible is against certain kinds, particularly the lukewarm kind, the temporary kind, the short-lived kind. The Bible would say that if you are going to pursue happiness, you should pursue the ultimate kind, the longest lasting kind, the most indestructible kind. The key to unlocking the Bible's view of happiness is to understand the meaning of this day, the meaning of Christ's Resurrection.

In this text Paul introduces us to three different kinds of happiness. We are going to meet the mildly happy man. We'll discover the most miserable man. And then we'll learn of the m Finally, we shall seek to understand The man of mirth

### **I. The Mildly Happy Man**

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1 Cor. 15:19)

Paul tells us that of all men, some men are to be pitied more than others, which implies that all men have something pitiable about them. In other words, there is unhappiness in all mankind. The overall plight of man is a sad one seeking remedy. It is a sad plight that most men pursue. The human condition seems more like tragedy than comedy. If we were to total up all the tears of Man, they would surely drown out all his laughter, and quench all his Joy. This is not to say that most men live in perpetual mourning or sadness. No, this first man we are considering, we could say that he is mostly happy. Indeed, the Bible is clear that for many, sadness only visits them at times. Asaph, in Psalm 73 made it so clear

For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm.<sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment.<sup>7</sup> Their eyes bulge[a] with abundance; They have more than heart could wish.

No indeed, they make it their business to forget their sorrows. And many succeed. The pride and boast of First World Nations is their so-called quality of life. And by this they usually mean their ability to be happy without God. Never in recorded history have men been so successful at perfecting their material state. We have multiplied pleasures until we have grown sick and tired of them. But for all this, misery quietly haunts all men.

A man without God feels his misery acutely when he thinks about death. Solomon, like a doctor without compassion grimly reads out the human condition in the face of death. He relates the pain that comes to men when death comes into view, when death's black light shines on their lives. These are the party-crashers, that spoil the fun, when they are considered.

### **He can't take his learning and his education with him.**

<sup>14</sup> The wise man's eyes *are* in his head, But the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived That the same event happens to them all. <sup>15</sup> So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also *is* vanity." <sup>16</sup> For *there is* no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now *is* will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise *man* die? As the fool! (Eccl. 2:14-16)

### **He can't take his achievements with him.**

<sup>21</sup> For there is a man whose labor *is* with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also *is* vanity and a great evil. (Eccl. 2:21)

### **He can't take his possessions with him.**

<sup>15</sup> As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, To go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labor Which he may carry away in his hand. <sup>16</sup> And this also *is* a severe evil-- Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has labored for the wind? (Eccl. 5:15-16)

### **His morality won't keep him alive.**

<sup>2</sup> All things *come* alike to all: One event *happens* to the righteous and the wicked; To the good, the clean, and the unclean; To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so *is* the sinner; He who takes an oath as *he* who fears an oath. <sup>3</sup> This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing *happens* to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. (Eccl. 9:2-3)

### **He can't succeed with pure ability or hard work.**

<sup>11</sup> I returned and saw under the sun that-- The race *is* not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all. <sup>12</sup> For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, Like birds caught in a snare, So the sons of men *are* snared in an evil time, When it falls suddenly upon them. (Eccl. 9:11-12)

### **He can't remain young.**

**Ecclesiastes 12:1** Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the difficult days come, And the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them": <sup>2</sup> While the sun and the light, The moon and the stars, Are not darkened, And the clouds do not return after the rain; <sup>3</sup> In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, And the strong men bow down; When the grinders cease because they are few, And those that look through the windows grow dim; <sup>4</sup> When the doors are shut in the streets, And the sound of grinding is low; When one rises up at the sound of a bird, And all the daughters of music are brought low; <sup>5</sup> Also they are afraid of height, And of terrors in the way; When the almond tree blossoms, The grasshopper is a burden, And desire fails. For man goes to his eternal home, And the mourners go about the streets. <sup>6</sup> Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, Or the golden bowl is broken, Or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, Or the wheel broken at the well. <sup>7</sup> Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Eccl. 12:1-12:7)

So the mildly happy man must feel the emptiness, the futility of life whenever death comes into view. But for many, it rarely does. They have become experts in keeping death at the very periphery of their minds, masters of distraction, highly skilled in keeping the thought of death as far away from themselves as possible. His life is joyful so long as it contains no shadow of death, no hint of mortality. As long as he needs not add up and calculate what his life is worth once you have added and factored in death, he is happy. If he is forced to do that arithmetic, and comes to Solomon's answer – zero – he will be miserable.

If this is you today, I don't begrudge you your happiness or envy your choices. I only wish you gave thought to how it might be permanent. I only wish that your boat did not have such a gaping hole in it, where with the passing years, age pours in like water, and you know it is only a matter of time before it sinks. You may have heard of the band that kept playing as the Titanic sank, and so many men seem to me. They have no hope and no life except on board the sinking ship of this life and they suffice themselves with arranging the chairs, listening to the music and waiting for the end. So I pray this day you will hear of another way. I do not pray that you leave happiness for unhappiness, but that you leave the temporary for the permanent, the incomplete for the complete, the partial for the full. That is the life, the Abundant Life that Jesus Christ offers the world.

But we turn now to the second kind of man.

## **II. The Most Miserable Man**

<sup>19</sup> If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1 Cor. 15:19)

Of all creatures on God's earth, this is the saddest. His bitterness is of the strongest sort. He of all deserves the deepest consolation, but there is none for him. I would hope not, but I suspect he or she may be among us today.

What does Paul mean by this? If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. Paul is speaking in this chapter about the Resurrection. There were some at Corinth who had believed the most extreme of heresies, that there was no such resurrection. Paul then takes out his chalk, and begins drawing a logic diagram for the Corinthians. He says, if there is no resurrection, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then there is no Gospel to preach, and no salvation to believe in. The apostles are liars, the New Testament is a sham, and every Christian in the world is still unforgiven, and unredeemed from sin.

And to top it all off, all the Christians we know that have died, died in their sins, and have gone to Hell. Now all that would be true if the resurrection had not occurred.

If the resurrection had not occurred, then the only hope for Christians would be something in this life, something connected to our faith and doctrine, but with nothing beyond this life.

Now here is the real question. If we place our hope in this life only, why does that make Christians the most miserable of all? Would it not simply make us like the miserable man we saw at first, the one who enjoys this life, as long as he keeps death from his thoughts?

No, says Paul. The Christian who has no hope beyond this life would be the most miserable of all. Why?

Here is why he is so miserable. First, he has renounced many of the world's pleasures, but without Heaven and Resurrection, he is needlessly missing out. His life is pure subtraction, losing,

abstaining, refusing, but nothing gained from it.

Second, he knows the profound emptiness of the world's pleasures. He has come to know this world is vanity of vanities, but without life in the next world, he must sink into the bottom of depression. He can't enjoy this world like his unsaved neighbour. But if there is nothing beyond this life, then he has lost even the small consolations that his neighbour has.

Third, he endures unusual tribulation, but has no future consolation. Tribulation begins at the house of God. Suffering is appointed to those privileged to share Christ's inheritance. Believers are hard-pressed on every side, but without Heaven, there is no consolation, no compensation, just more suffering.

Now we might say, but since we believe in the Resurrection, none of this is true of us. None of us need be the most miserable man. True, but I think there is another group we might bring into view. There are Christians who do not deny the Resurrection, or doubt its truth, but they live as if it is not true. They are not unbelievers, they do not deny the Gospel, but they practically act as if the Resurrection and Heaven makes no difference to them. Their creed is sacred, but their deeds are secular, their beliefs are biblical, but their behaviour is worldly.

This Christian lives practically without resurrection-hope, without Heaven, and so lives in a sad halfway house, a twilight world where it is neither night nor day, neither hot nor cold.

The unbelieving man knows his home, and he lives here. He plants his flag in this life and then lives for it. Here is where his treasure is, and so here is where you find his heart. He is not concerned with another world, or a next life. He is invested in this life, this world, and he means to wring this sponge dry of every drop of happiness it can get him. His ship may be sinking, but he will enjoy the music while it goes down. His side is losing, but he enjoys the game while it lasts. Night is coming, but he'll play as long as he can still see his feet.

But the most miserable man in the world is the Christian who confesses he is a citizen of another world, but lives as if this is the only one that will ever be. The unhappiest man or woman on God's Earth is the truly born-again Christian who tries to live like his unbelieving neighbour, with his hopes in this life, his joys here and now, his wealth temporal, his pleasures material, his focus earthly. He is miserable because he has a new nature, he breathes the air of heaven, but he now tries to live in the water of worldliness. His tastebuds have been altered to relish God's Word, but he tries ever so hard to keep eating from the world.

Nothing can be worse than denying yourself some sinful pleasures because they seem extreme, while embracing others, heaping on yourself guilt and conviction. Nothing is worse than looking longingly over at the fleshpots of Egypt, looking at the world and wishing you were back in there, while refusing to seek first the kingdom of God. Nothing is sadder than the believer who can no longer enjoy the world, but still tries, like chewing gum which has long ago lost its flavour, but you keep on chewing, like trying to relive an experience and pretend you are not bitterly disappointed. The believer who suffers, but does not love the promises of God, does not live for future reward goes through her trials like an unbeliever, alternating between despair and grim determination, penduluming between anger and self-pity, but all without hope. And it is worst of all, because like a pebble in the shoe are the promises she has sung in the hymns, Scriptures she has heard, exhortations she has received, but she is hardening her heart to them. She refuses to die to the old life and live to the new.

<sup>21</sup> And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word. (1 Ki. 18:21)

**Mat 6:24** "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

To Christ, the church at Laodicea was so worldly as to be nauseating.

<sup>15</sup> "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. <sup>16</sup> "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. <sup>17</sup> "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'-- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- (Rev. 3:15-17)

I think when Christians live like this, we become nauseating to ourselves. We taste of our own lukewarmness, and it increases the misery.

How do you know if you are one of these? If you could subtract the hope of Heaven from your life, if it still makes sense, you are probably living just as your unsaved neighbour. If nothing about your life makes no sense apart from Christian resurrection, then it is safe to say that your life is not distinctly Christian.

And like the unsaved man, I do not begrudge you your life. Far from it! I know you; I have met you in the mirror enough times in my life to tell you that I know your wretchedness, the distaste you have for yourself, the restlessness of your soul, the guilt that you live with, and the chastening hand of God that makes all the moisture in your life dry up.

To you I would say, you cannot be dead to the world and alive to it, or dead to Christ and alive to Him. If you are in Christ, you must count yourself dead to what you are dead to, and alive to what you are alive to. You must become what you are.

So then, let us meet the third man.

### **III. The Man of Mirth**

But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Cor. 15:20)

The third man is not stuck in the middle, as the most miserable Christian. Nor is he arranging deck-chairs on the Titanic. The man of mirth is the Christian who lives in God's presence, with God's promises while he lives in this world. He abides in Christ, while he lives in the world, looking to another.

What do I mean? He is in this world, and he can enjoy its gifts, but he is enjoying it only as Jesus could enjoy this world. Jesus could go to weddings and enjoy feasts. Jesus enjoyed the company of children, of relatives, of good food. But Jesus could not enjoy sinful pleasures, and made no attempt to gain them. Jesus knew deeper than Solomon the vanities of this world, and He wept at Lazarus' tomb. Jesus faced tribulation and suffering deeper than we will, but He did so for the joy set before Him.

Jesus was a man of sorrows, but I don't believe you would ever find a purer joy than His. He lived in boundless optimism for what His Father would do, in sweet gratitude for life. He had undisturbed peace, and I think a serenity that must have been something to behold. There are times in the Gospels that we read of His joy bubbling out, as in Luke 10:21 when Jesus rejoiced in spirit. He tells His disciples that if they live in His presence, if they abide in Him, then His joy would be in them, and their joy would be full.

Clear your mind of those flea-market pictures of Jesus with a sullen or faraway look, and picture in

your mind a Jesus with deep and overflowing joy, his face lined with the burden of his mission, but lined with joy.

But I think it important to add where much of Jesus' joy came from. **Hebrews 12:2** looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus had joy here because He had hope beyond His own death. If in this life only He had had hope, He would have been of all men most pitiable. To abide in Christ, to be like Christ, is a life of joy. Not unmixed, not without pain, not without suffering. But it is not the misery of the Christian loyal to two masters, serving two worlds, trying to find love in two relationships.

The reason the Christian who lives with hope has continual mirth is that he knows the limits of this world. He receives the gifts of this life, but holds them loosely, understanding that they are temporary. He understands that they cannot provide fullness of joy. He stops going after those things of the world that he knows are empty. He faces the suffering of this life, with its tragedies and disappointments with hope. But most of all, he does not have to hide his face from death.

When he thinks of his family, or his children, or his money, or his achievements, or his possessions, death does not seem like the ultimate Enemy. If you add to death to an unbeliever's life, it is misery, because he has no other world. But if you add death to the Christian who is sold out to Christ.

**Colossians 3:1** If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

<sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. <sup>5</sup> Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Col. 3:1-5)

Verse 1 and 3 give you your position. You have died with Christ, you have been raised with Christ, your life is hidden with Christ. On Good Friday, you were on the Cross. On Saturday, you were in the tomb with Jesus. On Sunday, you were raised with Him. His life is your life. One day, at the Second Coming, His appearance will also be your appearance.

Now since this is your position, here is the practice.

On the death side, verse 5: continue to deaden what belongs in the grave. Those evil practices those things which offend God, flee from them. Those movies, magazines, music videos, websites that feed worldliness, cut them off, switch them off, turn from them. Deaden the evil influences in your life. Stop feeding sin, since you are now one with Christ who is dead to sin.

On the resurrection side, seek after the things of God. What do I mean? Your priorities, your motives, your loves, your desires, are they filled with Christ? Do you care about what He cares about? Do you love His church? Do you love evangelism? Do you love missions? Do you have burdens for souls? Do you long to see people disciplined in church? Are you desirous to see more ministry happen in this church? Do you desire Christian education for your children and for others? Does your heart beat for more prayer? Are you zealous for Christian doctrine, eager to learn about God? Do you desire to see all of Christ in all of life? This is setting your mind on Christ, on Him, on things eternal, imperishable, permanent.

So of these three, which are you today? If you are the first, why seek happiness that will run out? Why place your hope in a sinking ship? For when you do die, you will of men be most miserable, suffering the displeasure of God forever. Surrender your life to Christ. Come to Him and believe in Him as your Lord and Saviour from sin.

If you're the second, how long will you try to escape your new nature? For that matter, how long do you think you can escape from the Lord? If He refused all your refusals the first time, what makes

you think you will succeed this time? Become what you are. Give up on the lukewarm life. Die to this world, live to the next.