

Keys To Happiness

By Rod Reynolds

What's the purpose of human existence? Why do YOU exist? And does it have anything to do with your own personal long-term happiness and fulfillment? Have you ever stopped to think - to ask?

Philosophers have pondered the question for thousands of years, but lacking God's Spirit and rejecting his counsel their answers have been unsatisfactory and incomplete. Winston Churchill said, "...he must indeed have a blind soul who cannot see that some great purpose and design is being worked out here below..." (speech before the U.S. Congress, December 26, 1941). But he -- though a great leader -- did not know what that purpose is! Human beings of themselves cannot fully discover God's purpose, but God does reveal it through his word coupled with the discernment granted through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6-14).

Our purpose - the purpose for which human beings were made and the potential with which every human being is born - is to be made over in the image of Jesus Christ, ultimately to be born into the family of God, with the very nature of God (Romans 8:29; 2 Peter 1:4). Those who fulfill their God ordained purpose will have eternal life (John 3:16), **God life**, for as William Barclay points out in discussing the meaning of *aionios* (eternal), **"... eternal life is nothing less than the life of God himself"** (*New Testament Words*, p. 37). But what then? Does God's life have purpose? If so, what is it? What will the divine family be doing for all eternity?

Jesus said, "I have come that **they may have life**, and that they may have it **more abundantly**" (John 10:10). An abundant life suggests a full and happy life — a life of joy.

Scripture reveals that God wants to share with us his eternal life for one simple reason: To enjoy it! "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that **your joy may be full**" (John 15:11). "... these things I speak in the world, that they may have **My joy fulfilled in themselves**" (John 17:13).

If you had to choose one word to describe this world, would you pick "happy"? Why is happiness so rare?

It's certainly not that people don't want to be happy. Philosophers have long recognized a universal human desire for happiness. Even the Declaration of Independence declares "the pursuit of happiness" to be a natural right of man -- implying that happiness is something everyone wants.

What are some of the common ways men seek happiness? Money is one of the most obvious. But money, as those who have plenty of it have learned, does not

guarantee happiness. Wealth can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how it's used, but by itself money cannot buy happiness.

Many talk of "self-esteem" as the key to happiness and fulfillment. Not love for God and neighbor; not sacrifice; not service to others; not righteousness and the pursuit of peace; but self-esteem! There's a plethora of books advising people to love *themselves*. This era has been aptly called the "Me generation." We have popular songs like "I Believe in Me," and "I Did It My Way." My desk dictionary gives pride as a synonym of self-esteem. Malachi prophesied of a perverse time when "we call the proud happy" (Malachi 3:15, KJV). But is this really the key to happiness?

Martin E. P. Seligman, President of the American Psychological Association, pointed out in an article entitled "The American way of blame," that recently we have seen a cascade of multiple murders in schools by American boys, while in the 1950s there were none. While there are multiple factors in the dramatic increase in extremely violent conduct relating to societal changes, one of them identified by Seligman is the replacement of discipline with an exaggerated emphasis on self-esteem among parents and educators. "Traditional American child-rearing in individual responsibility has been replaced by a self-esteem movement. This movement tells parents and educators that their first duty is to make kids feel good about themselves. Kids are taught mantras like 'I am special,' and they believe them. Low self-esteem is seen as the cause of teen-age pregnancy, depression, suicide, drug abuse and violence, and so teaching self-esteem is supposed to be a vaccine.

"Unfortunately it turns out that hit men, genocidal maniacs, gang leaders and violent kids often have high self-esteem, not low self-esteem. A recipe for their violence is a mean streak combined with an unwarranted sense of self-worth" (*APA Monitor*, July, 1998, www.apa.org/monitor/jul98/pc.html). Other prominent psychologists have echoed Seligman's observation in this regard. Biblical Hebrew has a term (*halal*) for selfish concern, self-centeredness, unwarranted self-esteem — manifesting itself either in pride, boasting, or self-display — that is aptly translated madness, and also folly and foolishness. In commenting on this word Gesenius states, "In the sacred writers, the more anyone boasts, the more he is regarded as being foolish; just as, on the other hand, a modest person is looked upon as wise..." (*Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*).

"God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; cf. 1 Peter 5:5). Paul warns, "For I say... to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." (Romans 12:3). In commenting on the Greek of this verse A.T. Robertson remarks, "Self-conceit is here treated as a species of insanity" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*). A phony self-esteem is not the key to happiness.

Some seek happiness in alcohol, drugs, sex or a variety of other activities or

things. But while some of these can enhance the joy of life, when used rightly, none of itself produces happiness.

God's Feast of Tabernacles portrays a future world of universal joy, rejoicing and happiness. God told his people that the feast was to be a time for rejoicing (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). The millennial setting pictured by the feast is characterized by joy and gladness (Isaiah 51:3, 11).

Alfred Edersheim in his book *The Temple* points out that anciently "the most joyous of all festive seasons in Israel was that of the Feast of Tabernacles" (p. 212). One of the lessons of the feast is that God purposes happiness for us. And in his word he reveals the keys to living a joyful, happy and abundant life.

These keys are given in outline form in the book of Ecclesiastes, although they are discussed in many Scriptures of the Bible. Ecclesiastes is one of the most maligned and misunderstood books in all the Bible. Although the internal evidence reveals Solomon as the author, some critics say he did not write it. Others, while granting that Solomon wrote the book, nevertheless deride it as uninspired. It's a book that commentators generally simply don't understand or appreciate. Yet the message of the book of Ecclesiastes fits hand in glove with the lessons taught by the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, the Jews traditionally read the book of Ecclesiastes during the Feast of Tabernacles. I'm not sure they now understand why, but at sometime in the past Jewish leaders did understand the connection between Ecclesiastes and this feast. Although many commentators regard Ecclesiastes as having a depressing and negative tone, when understood in its proper light its message is extremely positive and uplifting.

In Ecclesiastes Solomon refers to himself as the "Preacher." The Hebrew word *koheleth* actually means assembler, one who assembles, and hence preaches or teaches. Israel during Solomon's reign in many respects typified the millennium. And Solomon himself in many respects typified Jesus Christ ruling during that period. Solomon's name means peaceful. Israel was at peace during his reign. Israel was also the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth, the only period in ancient history when that was so. I Kings 8:1 ff. records an occasion when Solomon assembled Israel. At the dedication of the temple a feast was held followed immediately by the Feast of Tabernacles (verses 65-66; 2 Chronicles 7:8-10). Moreover, "men of all nations, from all kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (I Kings 4:34). In these things Solomon typified the time when peoples of all nations will be gathered to be taught by the reigning Jesus Christ (Isaiah 2:2-3; Zechariah 14:16).

In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon tells of his quest for the answer to the question, in effect, "What is life's purpose?" The entire book revolves around that theme (Ecclesiastes 1:12-13; 2:3). Though he did some foolish things, on the whole Scripture says Solomon was the wisest King Israel has had or will have this side of Jesus Christ (1 Kings 3:12; 4:29-31; 10:23; Ecclesiastes 1:16). He sought

answers to the question of life's purpose, and he found them. The principles he expounds apply not only to this transitory life but to eternal life as well.

The Keys

The first key to happiness that we find uncovered in Ecclesiastes is what some consider a dirty four letter word, w-o-r-k, *work*. "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should *enjoy good in his labor*. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24; cf. 2:10; 3:12-13). To paraphrase, the answer to the question of life's purpose has to do in part with your work.

When God made Adam and Eve he put them in a garden and gave them the work of dressing and keeping it. Their survival was assured, but they had work to do which would lend enjoyment to their lives. After they sinned they were kicked out of the garden and the nature of their work changed. "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:17, 19). And so for many life is constant toil, a struggle to survive through hard travail. In Scripture the reward of God's Kingdom is spoken of as a rest from the toil that has been a curse to mankind.

Yet, eternal life will not be a life of idleness, rather a life of joyful, creative work. God himself is a workman (John 5:17). His work produces joy both for himself and others (Psalm 104:31; Job 38:4-7).

The second key to happiness may be stated simply as *enjoying the fruits of one's labor*. "... It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage" (Ecclesiastes 5: 18). This principle is reflected in the Feast of Tabernacles. "You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. And you shall rejoice in your feast... the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice" (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). While enjoying the fruits of our labor at the feast we are picturing the millennium, when God says, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit... And My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands" (Isaiah 65:21-23).

The "booths," or temporary dwellings, featured at the feast remind us that our physical lives are temporary. This is a major theme of Ecclesiastes, and the message -- though universally applicable -- is especially suited for the millennial setting, when people will enjoy extended, prosperous lives free of disease and other plagues and deaths will be rare. In stressing an awareness of the transitoriness of this life, Scripture points to life in the resurrection as our ultimate goal.

The third key is sharing the fruits of one's labor and the joy of life with others. While having abundance can enhance the joy of life in the proper circumstances, Jesus said it's even more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Solomon relates this principle in terms of marriage. "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun... for that is your portion in life..." (Ecclesiastes 9:9). But the principle applies more broadly to all the members of the family sharing with one another (Psalm 127:3-5), and to extended families, communities, nations and the whole world.

Ultimately the principle of sharing the fruits of one's labor applies to the entire glorified family of God. The family -- where ideally each member contributes his share and each lovingly gives to the others -- is a microcosm of the divine plan. The principle is also expressed in the Feast of Tabernacles. "And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates" (Deuteronomy 16:14).

God is forever going to share the blessings of God life and all he possesses with his family (Revelation 21:7). Revelation 21:22-26 pictures the divine family producing and giving back to God a portion of what they produce. The divine family will be sharing life and its joys and what they produce through creative work forever. And all will worship and honor the Father and Jesus Christ through sharing with them the fruits of their labor. With an eternity to engage in creative endeavor, the possibilities are endless.

The Master Key. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). None of the other keys are fully effective apart from the fear of God and keeping his commandments. This key is also reflected in the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). God's commandments are not a curse or a burden, but together constitute the most vital of all keys to lasting joy. The commandments are designed to promote joy, and are given as a blessing (Deuteronomy 30:15-16; Psalm 1:1-3). Respect toward God and his way unlocks the potential for abiding happiness within the context of creative work and sharing (Psalm 128:1-4).

As you keep the Feast of Tabernacles reflect on how it portrays not only the joy of temporal life lived God's way, but the joy of life for all eternity. These principles -- work; enjoying the fruits of your labor; sharing with others; fearing God and keeping his commandments -- are simple. A child can understand them. But they are as profound as they are simple -- and they are reflected in the Feast of Tabernacles.

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 542
Peculiar, MO 64078
USA