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The Pursuit of Happiness: A Communion Meditation from Hebrews 4.14–16 and 12.1–3

Christopher Chesnutt

“**S**ince, then, we have a Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us, then, with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4.14–16 RSV)

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (Hebrews 12.1–3 RSV)

The Declaration of Independence opens with these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The phrase that frightens me the most is “the pursuit of happiness.”

Do you remember Diotrephes, the obscure character from 3 John 9? He possesses such an exaggerated sense of his own self-importance that John characterizes him as one who “loves to be first”—or, as other translations render it, “loves to have the preeminence,” “wants to be head of everything,” “likes to put himself first.” Or how about Narcissus, the mythical Greek character who sees his own image reflected in a pool and falls so deeply in love with it that he perishes there, unable to pull away and witness the beauty in anything or anyone else. (It’s from this ancient story that we get our English word “narcissism.”) And then there’s the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve resist the limitations their creator God places upon them and start calling the shots for themselves, taking charge as masters and commanders of their own destinies.

So just why, you ask, does this phrase, “the pursuit of happiness,” frighten me? Because if we are not careful, our “pursuit of happiness”—be it through notoriety, money, large mansions, fancy cars, sex, drugs, alcohol, food, books, careers, sports, relationships, or any number of things—can easily turn into self-centered, self-absorbed living, ultimately separating us from our creator God. As C. S. Lewis wisely observes, “All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”¹ The Declaration of Independence was written and signed by men who had been heavily influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment. They were all familiar with the teaching of Francis Hutcheson of Glasgow, the Father of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hutcheson believed that everyone’s ultimate goal in life is happiness—but not in the narcissistic, hedonistic ways of Diotrephes, Narcissus, and Adam and Eve. He believed that the highest form of happiness for anyone is making others happy. “That action is best,” he said, “because it procures the greatest happiness.”²

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London, England: Fount Paperbacks, 1952), 50.

2 Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil* (London, England: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 3.8.

A scientific experiment conducted at the University of Oregon a few years ago supports Hutcheson's notion. A number of people were given money and the opportunity to either keep it or to give it away. Their brains were being monitored, and it was discovered that voluntarily giving to help others produced a response on the part of the brain that registers pleasure. Haven't we found it to be true that when we do things that make others happy, this produces happiness in us as well? Like seeing a child open a birthday gift; or a young student blossom as a result of our mentoring and teaching; or international missionaries that we support baptizing and welcoming new believers into God's family; or local mercy and justice ministries offering support and transformation to those in great need. On the other hand, the more self-focused and self-absorbed we become, the more we try to make ourselves happy by hoarding and spending money on ourselves, the more miserable and unhappy we will be.

Jimmy Durante's voice in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle* captures this in song: "Make someone happy, make just one someone happy, and you will be happy too." This helps us understand the puzzling statement in Hebrews 12:2: "Who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame." It seems strange to put joy and enduring the cross in the same sentence—sort of like comparing apples and oranges. But it is true that when Jesus went to the cross, he was in "the pursuit of happiness"—not the self-centered, self-absorbed brand of Diotrephes, Narcissus, and Adam and Eve, but of yours and mine. The happiness that comes from knowing that our sin is forgiven and we bear it no more! The happiness that comes from knowing that we are daily being transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Messiah! The happiness that comes from knowing that we are being reconciled to God and one another! The happiness that comes from knowing that our hope is not in vain because we are being cheered on by that great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us! All secured for us on the cross by the one who, for the joy set before him, endured its suffering and shame and now reigns victoriously at the right hand of the throne of God, and which we joyfully celebrate as we gather together around this Lord's Table!

"Oh God," prays St. Augustine, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."³ So in our struggles with temptation and sin, let us fix our gaze upon him who has perfectly endured everything that we endure so that we will not grow weary and lose heart! And let us approach his throne with assurance and confidence, for it is there we shall find his abundant mercy and grace to help us in our time of need! Thanks be to God!

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³ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.1.