

Do Not Waste the Gift

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a five-part series

July 5, 2015

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Jeremiah 7:1–8 (CEB)

Jeremiah received the LORD's word: ²Stand near the gate of the LORD's temple and proclaim there this message: Listen to the LORD's word, all you of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD. ³This is what the LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, says: Improve your conduct and your actions, and I will dwell with you in this place. ⁴Don't trust in lies: "This is the LORD's temple! The LORD's temple! The LORD's temple!" ⁵No, if you truly reform your ways and your actions; if you treat each other justly; ⁶if you stop taking advantage of the immigrant, orphan, or widow; if you don't shed the blood of the innocent in this place, or go after other gods to your own ruin, ⁷only then will I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave long ago to your ancestors for all time.

⁸And yet you trust in lies that will only hurt you.

Daniel 3:14–18 (CEB)

¹⁴Nebuchadnezzar said to them: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship the gold statue I've set up? ¹⁵If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I've made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won't worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?"

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: "We don't need to answer your question. ¹⁷If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. ¹⁸But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up."

Philippians 4:8–9 (CEB)

⁸From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

To what end has God made us free?

As you know, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was edited by and adopted by the Second Continental Congress of the thirteen colonies. In the writing of the Declaration, Jefferson used a number of phrases that were current at the time and can be found in a number of similar writings. None of these phrases are more well-known to Americans than "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These are God-given unalienable rights and we create governments so that our exercise of these rights is secure and unrestrained.¹

Most of us have some idea what Jefferson and others meant by "life" and by "liberty." But what was meant by "the pursuit of happiness." For most of us, "happiness" refers to an emotional state of well-being – we *feel* happy. But Jefferson meant far more. It isn't clear whether Jefferson grounded the phrase in the work of John Locke (who used the phrase "life, liberty, and property") or elsewhere. Nonetheless, the "pursuit of happiness" had a clear meaning at the time that transcends any feelings we might have in the moment.

The Good Life

Jefferson and other founders embraced a philosophy grounded in Aristotle; namely, that a "happy" life is one that pursues the virtues and all moral excellence. In this way

¹ For more on this, see last week's study, for the week of June 28, 2015. An archive of all the studies I've written over the years can be found at www.scottengle.org.

of thinking, “happiness,” is the living of a virtuous life and is the highest human good. Carol Black writes,

The Greek word for “happiness” is *eudaimonia*. . . . In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote, “the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action.” Happiness is not, he argued, equivalent to wealth, honor, or pleasure. It is an end in itself, not the means to an end. The philosophical lineage of happiness can be traced from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle through the Stoics, Skeptics, and Epicureans.

Jefferson admired Epicurus and owned eight copies of *De rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Lucretius, a Roman disciple of Epicurus. In a letter Jefferson wrote to William Short on October 13, 1819, he declared, “I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.” At the end of the letter, Jefferson made a summary of the key points of Epicurean doctrine, including:

Moral.—Happiness the aim of life.
Virtue the foundation of happiness.
Utility the test of virtue.

Of course, as Christians we would define a virtuous life as one spent walking in God’s way. Indeed, we would hold that it is God, fully revealed in Jesus Christ, who has given us the full knowledge of what such a life entails.

This is all a very good thing, for if we were to believe that the pursuit of happiness is all about chasing after whatever makes us feel good in the moment, we would be eternally frustrated. In *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Gregg Easterbrook documents the trends of American and European life since the end of World War II. On page after page, Easterbrook demonstrates that just about every objective indicator of social welfare, from per-capita income to home size to education levels, have trended upward with hardly any interruption. Yet, in a 1996 poll, 52% of respondents said the U.S. was worse off now than when their parents were growing up and 60% expected things to get worse still. Only 15% felt things were improving. This was in the midst of an economic boom and before 9/11. The story of the last fifty years has been one of the average person getting better and better off, of practically everything getting better – everything except happiness!

In 1950, about 60% of Americans said they were “happy” and that figure is unchanged today. In 1950, 7.5% of people described themselves as “very happy.” This has fallen to about 6% today and continues to fall. Of course, we can’t be too sure exactly what we mean by happiness. Every study on happiness needs an asterisk. But still, ask yourself. Are you “happy?” Are you as happy as you imagined that you would be at this point in your life? Are you as happy as you think you ought to be?

But if we understand “happiness” as Jefferson did, then the question becomes this: Are we living a virtuous life devoted to justice and mercy and humility (Micah 6:8)? Even the word “pursuit” needs to be thought of differently. James R. Rodgers, a professor of political science at Texas A&M writes:

Arthur Schlesinger Sr. observed in an obscure book chapter that “pursuit” had a particular meaning at the time of the Declaration. While less employed today, this secondary meaning nonetheless remains in use when referring, for example, to the pursuit of medicine, or the pursuit of lawyering, etc. In this sense “pursuit” means occupation or practice. We might even think of it in the sense of vocation. So “the pursuit of happiness” means something like occupying one’s life with the activities that provide for overall well-being. This certainly includes a right to material things, but it goes beyond that to include humanity’s spiritual and moral condition.

Thus, our Declaration of Independence sets forth that God has made us free creatures so that we can embrace a vocation of virtue. And governments are instituted to secure our freedom as we strive to live an ever-more virtuous, i.e., Christ-like life.

Sadly, this is all very countercultural, for our nation is fast losing any moral consensus. This is no surprise, for without a source of morality outside ourselves, as in God(!), all moral claims dissolve into ever-louder shouts of “Who says!” If you doubt me, a judge in New York state agreed to hear a case about whether legal rights accorded humans should be applied to chimps. Really. As a society we are losing our ability to make moral distinctions that were once commonly embraced. Instead of any meaningful public discourse about such things, we are choosing to entertain ourselves to death and, in so doing, we risk wasting the unalienable rights God has given us.

Paul on the “happy” life

H. L. Mencken once wrote, “Nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.” Perhaps I’m just getting old or perhaps it is because I’m raising a teenager, but I’m reminded of Mencken’s observation almost daily. Whether it is the latest installment of *Real Housewives* or the newest violent and sex-drenched music

Excellence and Virtue

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In v. 8m of today’s passage from Philippians, when Paul urges the believers to dwell upon the things of “excellence,” he uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more and I think Paul uses it for that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God’s creation point us toward God; it is all to God’s glory. In the goodness of this world we can glimpse the kingdom of God. This is why Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we actually *be* excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us. We are to raise our eyes toward God and all that is excellent in everything we do.

video from lil’ somebody or other, too often our popular culture wants to drag our eyes down to the worst in us rather than raise our eyes to the best in us. We are bombarded daily with images meant to convince us that the path to the life we seek is lined with stuff and with sex. But, in today’s passage from Philippians, the apostle Paul points us in a very different direction – a direction embraced even by the pagans in Paul’s day and Jefferson in his.

After urging the Philippians to find the peace of God and shed worry through prayer, Paul goes on to point his readers toward a list of virtues. There is nothing particularly Christian about his list. The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good. This is all encompassed in what Jefferson meant by our pursuit of happiness.

We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don’t talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own pursuit of Christlikeness.

When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are

dwelling upon God and the things of God. Tom (N.T.) Wright had this to say about raising our eyes, “How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How

are you going to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?”²

I once heard a local musician talking about his devotion to God and to music. He commented that while he had once enjoyed playing the music of Mozart and Beethoven, he did no longer. He said that now he wanted to play only explicitly “Christian” music, such as contemporary praise songs and old hymns. While I appreciated his sentiments and devotion to God, he held a mistaken notion of what is God’s and what is not. All excellent music points us toward God, whether it was written for that purpose or not – whether it was written by a Christian or not. In the movie, *Amadeus*, Salieri is driven to madness by his realization that God had chosen to be heard through the music of the silly, far-from-devout Amadeus Mozart rather than himself. Salieri had prayed so hard that *he* might be God’s vessel, but still, he knew that when he heard Mozart’s music he was hearing the voice of God. Truly, all that is beautiful and true and excellent in this world bears God’s imprint and glorifies his name.

More than excellence, “happiness” is justice and mercy

The account of Jeremiah standing in the doorway of Solomon’s temple (Jeremiah 7) encapsulates much of the biblical message. The world is falling on what is left of the Israelite as kingdom, as the Babylonians are poised to run over Jerusalem and destroy God’s temple. Yet, the people fail to grasp their part in their own doom. So Jeremiah tells them the truth in a dramatic encounter. God tells the prophet that he is to stand in the doorway of the temple, challenging the people directly. Do they really think they can ignore the needy and oppressed, the widows and the orphans, and then come to wrap themselves in God’s temple? Can they rest in the proclamation, “This is the temple of the LORD”? No! They cannot. They had forgotten the word brought by Micah that what God wanted above all else was that they do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). They had turned God’s dwelling into a house of thieves and they were going to their doom.

Similarly, pursuing happiness is a life built upon seeking justice and mercy for all, it is a righteous life, dedicated to loving God and loving others. Could there be a higher virtue? This love is never merely feeling, as happiness is not about a mere feeling. True love, putting others ahead of ourselves, making sure that no one is without the basics of life – all this is what comprises a happy life, the good life.

Will we waste the gift God has given us?

We are Americans. We live in the nation created by Jefferson, Madison, and the rest. They may not have all been Christians in the sense that we usually mean, yet they created a system of government predicated on the belief that our Creator has given us unalienable rights. Liberty is ours, so that we can pursue a virtuous, God-filled, Jesus-shaped life. They understood rightly that governments are created to serve us, to secure our God-given rights, not to give them to us.

And it is our responsibility to protect this freedom and do all we can to ensure that such freedom is secured for all. But what sort of tyranny or despotism threatens us, a democratic nation? For this we, turn again to de Tocqueville. I hope you’ll take the time to read this in its entirety; it will be worth your trouble. It is astonishing that he wrote these words nearly 200 years ago.

I think therefore that the kind of oppression with which democratic peoples are threatened will resemble nothing that has preceded it in the world; our contemporaries would not find its image in their memories. I myself seek in vain an expression that exactly reproduces the idea that I form of it for myself and that contains it; the old words despotism and tyranny are not suitable. The thing is new,

²from Tom Wright’s, *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters*, published by Westminster John Knox and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 2002.

therefore I must try to define it, since I cannot name it.

I want to imagine with what new features despotism could be produced in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family still remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country.

Above these an immense tutelary power [a guardian] is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood; it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?

So it is that every day it renders the employment of free will less useful and more rare; it confines the action of the will in a smaller space and little by little steals the very use of free will from each citizen. Equality has prepared men for all these things: it has disposed them to tolerate them and often even to regard them as a benefit.

Thus, after taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and kneading him as it likes, the sovereign extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one's acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.

I have always believed that this sort of regulated, mild, and peaceful servitude, whose picture I have just painted, could be combined better than one imagines with some of the external forms of freedom, and that it would not be impossible for it to be established in the very shadow of the sovereignty of the people. Our contemporaries are incessantly racked by two inimical passions: they feel the need to be led and the wish to remain free.³

De Tocqueville knows us too well. We can let our God-given liberty slip right through our fingers. Perhaps, in the end, we Christians would end up feeling like strangers in a strange land. If this is not to be the future of Christianity in America, if our churches are not to become museums, we must set our minds and our wills on staying true to God, ready to proclaim the Good News, calling our country to the virtues, all the while doing everything we can to pursue justice, to feed the hungry, and to heal the sick.

Daniel and his friends faced death if they insisted on holding to their God. Though Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were tossed in a furnace, they remained free, proclaiming the truth of God. Same for Daniel when he was tossed in amongst the lions. They may have been imprisoned, but their hearts and minds and voices remained free. May we do likewise, determined that regardless of our circumstances we will stay true to our God, pursuing the happiness that is a life lived in the Jesus Way.

³ de Tocqueville, Alexis (2012-10-18). *Democracy in America* (pp. 663-664). University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.

