HAPPINESS! BUT WHERE? LIGHT ON OUR DARKNESS



BY

REV. JOHN A. O'BRIEN, PH.D., LL.D.

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of the University of Notre Dame



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HAPPINESS! BUT WHERE?

THE UNIVERSAL DESIRE

HERE can I find happiness? Such is the cry of every mortal born into this world. The hunger for happiness is universal. It is independent of age and race. It gnaws alike in the hearts of the rich and of the poor. From the time when man first lifted his face to the skies he has felt an inner compulsion driving him to seek unwearingly the things which would bring him happiness.

The literature of all the races, from the Psalms of the ancient Hebrews and the Upanishads of the East, through the dramas of Aeschylus and the odes of Horace, down to the last sophisticated novel of our day, reveals this dominant hunger of the human heart. As the whole life of the animal world is reflected in the conjugation of the verb, to eat, in the active and in the passive voice, so the whole of human life is mirrored in the conjugation of the verb, to rejoice, in the past, present and future tenses. Young and old, rich and poor, philosopher and peasant, saint and sinner, have this one trait in common — a desire for happiness.

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Indeed it is the one conscious activity in the life of man wherein, all philosophers admit, the will is not free. It is coerced by an inner necessity, by the very nature of the human heart and soul, to reach out for the waters which will slake even temporarily the perennial thirst for happiness.

If we look into our own hearts, most of us will find that our deepest and most insistent yearning as we journey from the cradle to the grave is for just a bit of precious happiness. Can we find it? Or will the darkness envelop us before we reach it, leaving the stone marking our grave as the symbol of the hand still stretched out in unavailing search for the elusive Blue Bird?

If we look into the faces that hurry by us on the crowded streets of our large cities, we cannot fail to observe a worried restlessness, a fretful uneasiness, which tell us that in spite of all their frenzied haste men have not as yet caught up with the object of their quest. Fear and worry are written in the lines of their countenances and reflected in their quick, furtive glances. Insecurity hangs like the sword of Damocles over the heads of most, ready to fall upon them at any moment. Even the few who have resources which would seem adequate are tortured by the fear that reverses may number them

with the insecure. The feverish tempo of modern life reveals alike its frenzied eagerness for happiness and its tragic failure to find it.

Much of modern literature is but the modern voicing of the age-old cry of Solomon: "Vanity of vanities and all is vanity!" For man is still driven by an inner necessity to search for happiness. Today on every side he hears the cry of his contemporaries in the self-same pursuit, a cry for the most part of frustration, disappointment and disillusionment. Must it echo forever in a bleak emptiness? Or is there somewhere in the universe the reality which answers this universal cry and satisfies this universal hunger?

GOD — THE ANSWER

God is that reality. God is the only answer to our desire for happiness. For man is more than a physiological carrot, more than a mere animal. He is an amphibian — an inhabitant of two worlds. One is the material, the other the spiritual. While man must eat bread to live, he does not live by bread alone. He has a spiritual nature which must be nourished and exercised not less than his body. It is in this spiritual element of his nature that man's true dignity lies. It is this which makes him the crowning glory of God's creation, a child of God, and an heir of heaven.

The food of man's spiritual nature is worship, prayer, communion with God. If these sources of invigoration are neglected, his spiritual nature becomes anaemic and paralyzed. The world of spiritual qualities grows increasingly wraithlike and unreal. Finally he degenerates into a mere worldling to whom the only realities are the things he perceives with his senses. Enthralled in the prison cell of the material, he falls under the tyranny of the visible and loses his habitation in the spiritual world. In short, he has become for all practical purposes an animal whose face is no longer turned toward the stars - an animal rooted in the earth.

Such a creature can still glut himself with the pleasures of the earth, but that deeper happiness which comes from the increasing achievement of spiritual values is denied him. He has lost the distinguishing characteristic of man — the upturned face, the outward symbol of the upward thrust within the human soul. Casanova with his face buried deep in the swine trough, wallowing luxuriously in the pigsty, deaf, dumb and blind to all the filth around him, is the

symbol of the animal which was once a man — before it lost its soul. True, pleasures of the pigsty still remain, but the joys which emerge from the distinctive part of man's nature, his spiritual faculty, are gone forever. With them goes man's chance for happiness. "All things betray thee who betrayest Me."

In worship one finds the challenge to consecrate oneself to the attainment of the highest spiritual values. "He that shall lose his life for My sake," said Christ, "shall find it." Religion prompts one to lose oneself in the conscious striving for the achievement of noble ideals-helping the underprivileged, sharing our means with those in need, shoving back the boundaries of our darkness, struggling for peace and fighting all the forces which undermine the physical, intellectual and moral life of a community. "Therefore all that you wish men to do to you, even so do you also to them," is the basic rule of the spiritual life and the noblest principle of ethics.

"As long as you did it for one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it for Me," is the principle which has inspired many a follower of the Master to rise above sentiment and prejudice, to see in the countenance of the leper, the ragged poor and

the lowly, the lineaments of the face of Christ, and to act accordingly. In that complete forgetfulness of self which comes from ministering to the needs of others, man finds his deepest happiness. The following of Christ's way of life thus leads to the attainment not only of the noblest spiritual values but of the highest joy as well.

HUNGER FOR GOD

The hunger of the heart for love has its counterpart in the hunger of the soul for God. If a man is honest with himself, he will find that one of the deepest cravings of his soul is for the friendship and the love of God. Everyone desires approval for his actions, but most of all the approval of God. If this be lacking the applause of the world falls upon deaf ears. The consciousness of the contrast between the world's applause and God's disapproval only deepens the gnawings of conscience. All humanity bears witness to the sickening unhappiness engendered in the soul of man by a disapproving conscience. What would men not have given if they could but have bribed that internal voice to have altered its verdict of "guilty" to one of "innocent," or at least to have withheld the thunder of its condemnation?

The literature of the race is full of man's varied attempts to cheat the moral law and to anesthetize the internal monitor with all the cunning, craftiness and specious rationalizations which the human mind could devise. But they have all failed and will always fail. Why? Because they are seeking to do violence to the very structure, pattern and nature of the human mind and soul. God's architecture still remains intact after man's bombardment of it through all the centuries.

The crystallization of the race's experience with virtue and vice is found in these conclusions, simple yet of universal validity: There is no way of bribing conscience, no escape from it. There is no pain worse than the gnawing remorse of a disapproving conscience. There is no joy greater than that of a good conscience. The pillars of the earth may collapse and the heavens may fall, but the man with a good conscience remains unshaken. "Who is there," said Christ, "to harm you, if you are zealous for what is good?" There is no crisis in life, not even the grim crisis of death, which need banish the smile from the face of the man who carries within him the joy of a good conscience. Verily, a good conscience is a wall of brass which no enemy can pierce. Thus does Alexander Pope describe the armament of the virtuous:

"True conscious Honor is to feel no sin, He's armed without that's innocent within:

Be this thy screen, and this thy wall of brass."

THE POWER OF CONSCIENCE

In his various plays Shakespeare sounds all the notes of the diapason of conscience, showing its power to reward and the ceaseless gnawing of its torture. After Cardinal Wolsey has fallen from the king's grace and has been stripped of all his honors, he bids "Farewell! a long farewell to all my greatness," and turns to the God he had neglected for the favor of his sovereign. In the sorrow for his misplaced loyalty and in the rededication of his services to the God Who will not leave him naked to his enemies, Wolsey finds the whisperings of an approving conscience which brings him a quiet joy never felt when his security hinged upon the approval of his whimsical king. To Cromwell's question, "How does your Grace?" Wolsey replies in words vibrant with the experience of all humanity:

"Why, well; Never so truly happy, my good Cromwell. I know myself now; and I feel within me A peace above all earthly dignities, A still and quiet conscience." Contrast this quiet joy with the thousand tongues which plague King Richard III for his butcheries, and sear his restless mind with the ceaseless cry of guilt:

"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale, And every tale condemns me for a villain. Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree:

Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree; All several sins, all used in each degree, Throng to the bar, crying all: 'Guilty! guilty!'"

The Bible abounds with passages descriptive of the power of conscience to reward and to punish, to mete out happiness or misery. Thus vividly does the author of the Book of Proverbs enumerate the blessings which flow upon him who keeps the law and the counsel:

"Then shalt thou walk confidently in thy way, and thy foot shall not stumble: If thou sleep, thou shalt not fear: thou shalt rest, and thy sleep shall be sweet. Be not afraid of sudden fear, nor of the power of the wicked falling upon thee. For the Lord will be at thy side, and will keep thy foot that thou be not taken."

The evils which overwhelm the man who sins against the light of his own conscience

are thus depicted with a great power of imagery in the mighty drama of Job:

"The wicked man is proud all his days, and the number of the years of his tyranny is uncertain. The sound of dread is always in his ears: and when there is peace, he always suspecteth treason. He believeth not that he may return from darkness to light, looking round about for the sword on every side. When he moveth himself to seek bread, he knoweth that the day of darkness is ready at his hand. Tribulation shall terrify him, and distress shall surround him, as a king that is prepared for the battle. For he hath stretched out his hand against God, and hath strengthened himself against the Almighty."

JOY OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Fidelity to conscience is one of the favorite themes of the New Testament. Its approval is to be sought at the cost of every pain and hardship. Its reprimand unleashes upon man a train of miseries far worse than the fury of the elements — the pensive music of a world out of tune. St. Paul traces his joy to the approving voice of conscience, a voice which echoes its refrain through all the books of the New Testament: "For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity — not in carnal wisdom, but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in this world."

Second only to the Bible in its insight into the mystery of the human personality, into the ways of the human heart, into the marvelous capacity of the human conscience to forge the thunderbolts of hell in the soul of the sinner and to fill the soul of the just with the calm radiance of heaven, is The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis. In any list of the ten outstanding classics of the world's literature this little book must find a place. While each chapter is a mine of solid gold, the one on the joy of a good conscience shines with particular brilliance. Though written in his monastic cell at Zwolle, Holland, in the early fifteenth century, it is as modern as tomorrow's newspaper. Every sincere searcher for happiness will do well to reflect upon these words of à Kempis:

"The glory of a good man is the witness of a good conscience. Keep a good conscience, and thou shalt always have gladness. A good conscience can bear very much, and is exceeding joyful in the midst of adversity.

"A bad conscience is always timid and uneasy. Sweetly wilt thou rest if thy heart blame thee not. Never be glad but when thou hast done well.

"The wicked have never true gladness, nor feel peace within; because there is no peace for the wicked, saith the Lord.

"And if they shall say: We are in peace, evils will not come upon us, and who shall dare to hurt us? believe them not; for the wrath of God will arise on a sudden, and their deeds shall be brought to nought, and their thoughts shall perish.

"To glory in tribulation is not hard to him who loves; for so to glory is to glory in the cross of the Lord.

"The glory is short-lived which is given and taken by men. That glory of the world is always accompanied by sorrow.

"The glory of the good is in their consciences, and not in the mouths of men.

"The gladness of the just is from God and in God, and their joy is in the truth....

"That man has great tranquillity of heart who cares neither for praise nor dispraise. He will easily be content and in peace whose conscience is clean.

"Thou art not more holy if thou art praised, nor worse if thou art dispraised.

"What thou art, that thou art; nor canst thou be said to be greater than God sees thee to be. "If thou considerest well what thou art within thyself, thou wilt not care what men may say of thee.

"Man looketh on the outward appearance, but God looketh on the heart. Man considers the actions, but God weighs the intentions."

THE COSMIC UNDERWRITER OF VALUES

The tragedy of the international scene today is that nations are seeking protection primarily behind a wall of bristling armament and only secondarily, if at all, behind the brass wall of a good conscience. A nation should be more concerned in seeing that its cause is just than in seeing that its powder is dry and its aircraft is filling the sky. Thrice armed is he whose cause is just. Ordered peace, durable and lasting, can be established only when the emphasis is shifted from might to right, only when it is realized that right alone constitutes a valid title to power. Only when loyalty to God and to the ideals of justice and truth comes in to tip the scales of selfishness and greed will nations find the path that leads to peace.

God is the Guarantor of the validity of the moral law, the cosmic Underwriter of the spiritual values of the universe. He is both the center and the circumference of

the universe, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. From His creative womb man has issued and to His all-embracing arms he is destined ultimately to return.

To worship God, to serve Him and to love Him is not only man's deepest duty but his highest privilege. But we cannot do any of these intelligently, unless we first know Him. The most important knowledge in the world, therefore, is the knowledge of God. It is doubtful, however, if there was ever a period within the Christian era when there was more ignorance of God and more confusion about Him than at the present time. "Today," observes Professor Whitehead of Harvard, "there is but one religious dogma in debate: What do you mean by God? And in this respect today is like all our yesterdays."

Many contemporary writers follow the vogue set by Dewey, Whitehead, and Wieman of burying God under an avalanche of words. Heralds of the Gospel speak of Him with vagueness and in accents of evident uncertainty. People in the pews detect these overtones of doubt, and in consequence faith has become for many of them "a refined doubt sublimated into a hesitant assumption." Under the welter of this confusion, God has faded for many into an oblong blur almost lost in the all-encompassing fog. Their uncertainty about God is making them miserably unhappy. For it renders them less sure of themselves, of the purpose of life and of human destiny. With wistful eyes and groping hands they are searching for something to steady them, for a firm hold on God.

GOD — THE MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE

God is not a mere dream, not a hypothesis, not the projection of our hopes and aspirations upon the frail canvas of illusion. He is the meaning of the universe and the hope of humanity. He gives a cosmic value to the ideals of truth, justice and righteousness which point like converging arrows of light to the Source from which they emanate. To know God, said Dante, is to learn how to make our lives eternal. Long before Dante, St. John proclaimed the important truth almost lost in the contemporary fog: "This is eternal life: that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent." Back before the dawn of the Christian era the Psalmist cried: "To know Thee, O God, is perfect righteousness; yea, to know Thy dominion is the root of righteousness." Like a cloud by day and a

pillar of fire by night runs this mighty truth through the pages of the Old and the New Testament.

It is our birthright, our priceless heritage. If the birthright be sold for a mess of pottage, and the heritage be lost in the contemporary.fog, there is no power on earth that can rescue man from his Babylonian captivity or relieve the nostalgia and loneliness of his exile.

God is the answer to the cry of every noble soul seeking to find coherence and meaning in life. He alone gives a cosmic undergirding to our gropings for justice, righteousness and love. "What doth the Lord thy God require of thee," asked the prophet Micheas, "but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?" God shines forth most luminously in the person of Jesus Christ, the untarnished Mirror of the Most High. God stands revealed to us in the character of Him Who cleanses the lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, forgives the woman taken in adultery, washes the feet of His disciples, and sheds His blood for the redemption of mankind.

A MINISTRY OF LOVE

See Him as He walks over the dusty roadsides of Judea and Galilee and says to His disciples: "Learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart." It was His ministry of mercy and love that inspired His disciple St. John to give the noblest definition of God ever uttered, when he said simply: "God is love." "If anyone love Me," said Christ, "he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him."

Jesus, then, has given us a better and truer picture of God than can be found in the writings of all the philosophers, theologians, prophets and mystics since time began. How radiantly beautiful, how winsome and appealing to the hungry hearts of men! God is infinite Beauty, Truth, Goodness, Mercy, Love. It is this vision of God which has inspired the noblest enterprises of Christianity, built hospitals, orphanages, homes for the friendless, and has prompted man to find in the service of the poor and the lowly his title to nobility. When Christians have allowed this vision of a God of love to fade and to be replaced by a God of vengeance, cruelty and wrath, they have stained the pages of history with some of the worst crimes in its long annals. It was this false picture which prompted John Calvin to burn his theological opponent, Michael Servetus, which caused the fanatics

to kindle the fagots under Joan of Arc at Rouen.

Some time ago I stood on the summit of the great Pyramid at San Juan Teoteehuecan in Mexico. There before me was the stone altar on which the Aztec priests placed the quivering hearts of thousands of human victims to placate their pagan god. With a jagged stone they pierced the body of the victim and reached in with their hands to pull out the heart, still throbbing, and place it on the altar as the most delectable morsel to appease their bloody Moloch. At the foot of the Pyramids stretches a road, called La Via de los Muertos, along which the doomed victims walked at times by the thousands to their place of slaughter. This in the name of religion. This in the name of God! The fact that these atrocities have been exorcised from the face of the earth, is traceable primarily to the purification of man's vision of God, to the replacement of the old concept of a God of vengeance and cruelty with one of mercy, justice, compassion, tenderness and love - the vision inspired by Christ.

A Religion of Joy and Love

The religion of Christ is not one of gloom and sadness, but of joy and peace and love. This was the note sounded by the learned Franciscan, Father Nicholas Higgins, in the course of one of his arresting sermons. Asserting that those people who identify religion with a funeral procession completely misinterpret the mind of Almighty God, Father Higgins defined religion as "the achievement of joy and peace through constant attempts at union of the soul with God, the keeping of a good conscience, and the surrender of the will to God."

"Our blessed Lord," Father Higgins continued, "came to make peace in the world. He never wanted gloom or depression, although He found plenty of time for sorrow. His coming was hailed with the words, 'Peace on earth to men of good will,' and He said to His disciples at the close of His earthly life: 'My peace I leave you; My peace I give unto you.' Holy Mother Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, prays every day that you will be blessed with peace of mind and body.

"The unfortunate thing is that so many misunderstand religion and look upon it as the very antithesis of joy and peace. In so many countries religion is being libeled today — it is libeled in the words carved over the Kremlin: 'Religion is the opiate of the people.' In such countries I would not be allowed to preach a sermon like this. Coming nearer home, we find so many with a false idea of religion....

"Our great St. Teresa wrote that she dreamed she saw souls going to hell like autumn leaves. This is constantly being misunderstood. She never said she saw souls going to hell; she said she saw them in a dream. I'm quite convinced that St. Teresa, with her great sense of humor, would not mind my suggesting here today that she must have had a very bad nightmare.

"I remember seeing a man going through a slum district with a placard on his back announcing: "The sinner shall go down into hell.' Fancy any man in the name of religion going among the poor, struggling for an existence and saying: 'If you are not careful, God will send you to hell.' Such a thing is an absolutely false interpretation of the mind of Almighty God."

When the vision of God as a Father of mercy, tenderness and love, as revealed to us in the character of Christ, finds lodgment in the mind of a person, it grips him, moves . him and transforms him. Forever afterward he is a different human being. It was this vision of God which sent Father Damien from his native Belgium to the neglected lepers in the island of Molokai in the far Pacific. The words of Christ, "As long as

you did it for one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it for Me," became the guiding principle of his daily life. For twenty years he ministered to them, with his own hands building houses for them, pouring oil into their wounds, bandaging their ulcerous sores, cheering them, breaking for them the Bread of Life, until he fell a victim of the dread disease. Father Damien, scholar of Louvain, had become for Christ's sake the Martyr of Molokai.

More helpful than intellectual subtlety in seeing God are a pure heart and a clean conscience. When Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was being led to martyrdom, a Roman soldier asked him leeringly: "Who is this Christian God of yours?" Gazing into the sensual, brutal face, Ignatius replied: "You shall know Him when you are worthy of Him." He learns about God who suffers persecution for justice' sake, who sacrifices for truth, who hungers for righteousness, who lives a godly life. Virtue is more important than knowledge in enriching one's vision of God. Live a holy life and God will dwell in you and make Himself known to you.

When God dwells in the soul of a person, a radiance shines in his face, a spiritual resonance sounds in his voice, and peace fills his heart. Nothing in the universe can supply the radiance lost when God is banished from a human life. The experience of humanity the world over verifies the finding of St. Teresa: "Where God is, there is heaven. Where God is not, there is hell."

God then is the answer to the cry of the human soul for happiness. In the partial possession of God in this life, we catch glimmerings of that supreme ecstasy which the soul will experience when it will be in intimate union with Infinite Beauty, Truth, and Love, when the unveiled majesty of the Eternal King will ravish the soul with beauty and still its restless yearning with a love that knows no ending. "Eye has not seen," says the great Apostle of the Gentiles, "nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him." A foretaste of that ineffable bliss is experienced by all who walk in the paths of peace and righteousness, who keep always the joy of a good conscience, and who feel the immanence of God in their hearts by the radiance of a love that embraces enemies. God is the apex of the pyramid of elements which constitute the enduring answer to man's age-old cry for happiness.

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