

Outline

Impossible Joy – A Second Chance

Many of us have lived our whole lives seeking to be happy, only to find ourselves in a state of depression because we have sought that Impossible Joy in everything but obeying the voice of God in our Fleeting Thoughts. We have sought to put ourselves first in our relationships, our activities, our philosophies, our lives and it has resulted in some fun times, but no lasting joy. We now find ourselves in an enslaved state of nonplus monotony. We are going through the motions and we are un-thrilled at our lives and how they have turned out. We thought they would go well if we just sought to please ourselves in every avenue. We followed the advice of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 2:

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Ecclesiastes 2:10,11 NIV

You know, in my life, I so often get the mistaken notion that the only way to be happy is to fill my senses with that which will make them happy. As long as my body feels good, then I can be happy. As long as I do not feel any emotional aches or burdensome thoughts, then I can be happy. If my relationships do not burden me or my life situations do not cause me undo stress, then I will be happy. In other areas I am tempted to fill all of my waking time with activities that make me feel good, and to be bored or to have to think about painful things for any period of time or to feel discomfort causes intense allergic reaction inside my spirit. This leads to my giving in to temptations like filling my inner ache with food to disguise the feeling of emptiness or to fill my mind with television to dull my thinking about what is painful or to allow my eyes to view things that make me feel accepted for a brief period of time and feed my inner woe with an unnatural endorphin rush of plastic acceptance in my panicked state of un-acceptance.

How about you? Are you allergic to pain, boredom, having to think about the cracks in your character? Do you try to fill your life with artificial sweeteners in your pursuit of happiness? Are you, like me, so often guilty of manipulating and bending life to create happiness in your life to eliminate anything that causes you not to feel happy? How many of you, like me, can relate to Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes where I attempt to deny myself “nothing my eyes desired; refuse my heart no pleasure?”

The thing about the “Pursuit of Happiness” is that it will lead us to that happy place in the short run. Even Solomon found the pursuit to be worth the effort for a period of time. The verse here implies that he put himself wholeheartedly into his hedonism, his ‘workaholism’, even his pursuit for achievement. He left no stone unturned. Solomon was determined to create his happiness, to make his life filled with blessing, to deny himself no good thing. And he enjoyed a sense of happiness for a time. **Life was good in the short run.** But he failed to account for the long-term consequence of the meaninglessness of artificially sweetening his life and eventually the long-term effects of striving in his own strength to create a happy life and to deaden the pain of life led Solomon to a very dark place:

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So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun. Ecclesiastes 2:17,18 NIV

When you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you will find yourself in a very dark place. It has some beautiful moments in it, yet, for the most part you will find yourself in the midst of a book that lives out the theme found in this verse and stated within the first few lines of the book and repeated in the last few lines of the book:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." Ecclesiastes 1:2 NIV

Ecclesiastes sounds very existential, very depressing, very dark. It does not sound like a book of encouragement. Yes and No. Ecclesiastes is Truth, the Word of God written by a person who found out the hard way that Impossible Joy is absolutely Impossible when it is produced outside the guidelines of the Eternal, Infinite Wisdom of Almighty God. We humans are utterly incapable of producing lasting joy and happiness in our lives. We Americans are masters at trying it: it is called the American Dream. We feel entitled to a life of happiness and no woe. **It is built into our DNA to expect that if we work hard enough, party long enough, accumulate enough of just the right possessions, we will produce a happy life.** It is our right, our inheritance. We have lived it so hard that we have tried to produce it through credit until our banks have failed, our mortgages have consumed us, our creditors own us. We have loved it so hard that our divorce courts are filled with those trying to create second chances at it. I95 is filled with weary commuters of those who are overworking to achieve it or earn it and losing their sanity and families in the meantime. We live Ecclesiastes' negative message of life being meaningless when we attempt to pursue its purpose and meaning on our own terms.

And yet, Ecclesiastes is positive encouragement as Solomon exhorts us to avoid his mistakes of pursuing life apart from God and his positive voice in our "Fleeting Thoughts." God cannot bless us when we choose to bless ourselves through leaving Him out of the mix, stubbornly refusing to trust His control of our lives. God will not force us to obey or follow His counsel, but He will allow our lives to be lived out in our "Sweet'N Low" strategies for creating our own happiness, and they always lead to meaningless lives. Solomon knew that and wrote the book of Ecclesiastes as the Truth of a "Failed Attempt" to live out such a strategy. But his very last note in the book let's us know what the wisest man in the world recommends by the lesson that he learned the hard way:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. Ecclesiastes 12:13 NIV

Impossible Joy is only possible by obeying the Wisdom of God in the Bible and the Word of God spoken to us in the "Fleeting Thoughts" of our mind.

There is another guy who lived most of his life according to this philosophy and had thrilling moments, yet had to chase one thrill after another to try and find the Impossible Joy. He

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chased after them until he found himself at the bottom of the barrel with no place to go. His name was Samson. As we look at Samson's story we find the tangible example of one who lived according to Solomon's failed counsel. We find one who spiraled down until his life ceased to have meaning. He found Joy an Impossible Dream in the chasing after it in his own strength. I would encourage you to read the book of Ecclesiastes this week to see what a "Failed Life Strategy" looks like and then read the biographical account of Samson in Judges 13 for a living example of one who lives out a life of human-filled pursuit for happiness. Samson will show you how to live it well and how it works for a time, even for years, but how it is destined for "meaninglessness." It all started out well with great potential as all our lives do:

The woman gave birth to a boy and named him Samson. He grew and the LORD blessed him, and the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him. Judges 13:24,25 NIV

Samson even started out obeying God's voice in His "Fleeting Thoughts," even when it did not make sense to others and he received outside pressure not to follow God's voice:

Samson went down to Timnah and saw there a young Philistine woman. When he returned, he said to his father and mother, "I have seen a Philistine woman in Timnah; now get her for me as my wife." His father and mother replied, "Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me. She's the right one for me." (His parents did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.) Judges 14:1-4 NIV

Samson was directed by God to marry someone outside his race, outside the sensitivities of his family, someone against whom his parents had prejudice. He heard the voice of God, yet as they so often do when they do not hear it or understand it, families and friends will try to talk us out of obeying God's voice in our "Fleeting Thoughts." Everything was going very well and a wedding was planned. However, there was hatred on the other side as well and a plot to hurt Samson was hatched using Samson's new wife as the bait. She tricked Samson into telling her the answer to a riddle that He had duped the men of the town into betting on. Through subterfuge, they won and Samson lost a fortune and eventually his wife and her father were killed. It was here that something broke inside Samson and he gave into a life of hatred, revenge, and pride.

Interesting guy, Samson - the Bible tells us that his Spiritual Gift was that of superhuman strength and courage. God gives us all spiritual gifts. Mine happens to be teaching. My friend, Randy's happens to be plumbing, which he uses to bless so many other people. If you were here last week, you heard from the Petersons, our missionaries to Peru. One of their gifts, I am convinced, is voluntary poverty, as they have little use for this world's goods and can live with little. It is good to find out what yours is and we will offer a class to determine this in October. A key to figuring out what your spiritual gift is? Ask yourself - "What do I enjoy doing for others that helps them out and I feel that God is proud of me for doing?" The answer to that question could be a million things, but definitely will reveal what your gift for ministry is. But Samson's gift was superhuman strength and courage. His is an awesome story of barehanded fights with lions, facing a thousand soldiers in a battle with only the jawbone of an ass as a weapon - and

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kicking their butt. One story was told of his being locked in an enemy town with very high walls and an immense gate that was shut at night to keep enemies out. They attacked him and he escaped by actually ripping the gates off the mighty hinges and carrying those gates all the way to another city and up the hill that faced the city. Man, I am really feeling gift envy right now. Imagine that! If I had his gift, I could be the defensive line for the Washington Redskins (imagine taking out the defense of the Cowboys with a donkey's mouth (not sure Jerry Jones would cooperate with me on that one, but it would be fun to try). I could open the jar of pickles that I had to ask Melodie to open for me. Not really spiritual gift stuff – hmmm.

Therein lies the problem. You see, Samson allowed his wonderful gifts from the Spirit of God go to his head. He violated what God had asked of him in his life. God wanted Samson to use his gifts of strength and courage to confront Israel's enemy the Philistines and convince them to release them from bondage. And Samson did do some of that. However, on many occasions, Samson used his spectacular gifts to appease his own appetites for physical things and lust for recognition. He let his self-centeredness rule his life and began to live a life of immediate gratification of self rather than service and ministry to family, friends, and community. He opted for "Sweet'N Low" short term success and pleasure rather than long-term relationship and maturity.

And guess what? It worked! Samson got the women. Samson got the revenge. Samson got the fame. However, Samson's long-term success and joy was sacrificed. He became surrounded with people who only wanted to use him for what he would give them. He was surrounded by people who fawned over him for fear of him. He surrounded himself with people who would not speak truth into his life and it resulted in the idea that Joy is an Impossible Dream. He lived for years on the self-sustained happiness, but self-sustained happiness always has a term limit, an expiration date. It may feel good and smell good in the present, but the future consequences and effects are harsh taskmasters. Look where Samson ended up after the betrayal of a friend, after his self-centered egoism did him in:

He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison. Judges 16:20-21 NIV

Interestingly enough man-made blessing and joy always leaves us blinded and weakened. And the crazy thing is – we do not even realize it until it is way too late and we wake up one day to find life empty and purposeless because God has left us to our own devices and our own artificially sweetened life. Life becomes a prison of our own choosing and feels awfully alone and empty.

1. Are you there? Has your life been one long attempt to bless yourself rather than rely on God's blessing? Have you sought to ignore God's voice patiently directing you to where you can live blessed? Has the fun stopped? Has the happiness gone? Can you relate to Samson who lived it up for quite some time, years even? He found success in the immediate – even happiness, but in the end, when it was too late and some really severe consequences set in, he woke up too late to be able to change the course his life was taking. Samson's is a sad story of a spiritually gifted human,

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who worshipped the gifts that God had given him instead of the God who had given him the gifts. God has blessed you equally with a free will to choose how to live your life, with talent that you have been able to turn into profit, with a family that, though quirky, loves you. And yet are you tempted to rule your own life and use the gifts for your own gain? It will end badly.

But it is not too late. The story of Samson is pretty cool in that it has a bitter-sweet ending.

Then Samson prayed to the LORD, "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes..." Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived. Judges 16:28-30 NIV

Samson died and ended up defeating the Philistines for making the same mistake he had made. They, in their self-centered egoism brought him into a great banquet to make fun of him and divinely set him up between the two pillars that held up the palace (bad design if you ask me). God had made him to be a leader to win Israel's freedom from their dominating enemies. The cool thing about this story is what it says about God in our lives as humans. He is not like me. I so often operate on the principle of "Burn me once, your fault, burn me twice – my fault." I will take you out for turning your back on me. Not God. God is the God of the 2nd and 3rd and 85th chance. When we turn to Him, He will always take us back. When we ask for it, He will always return to offering His blessing on our lives. Samson made a lot of mistakes in his life. But God was always there with His unconditional love to bless Him and use Him and offer Samson His Impossible Joy.

That is where God waits for you today. You think you have ruined your life and that it can never amount to anything? That is lie of the Enemy. You think God could never use you for you have made too many terrible mistakes? God's example here proves just the opposite. He won't heal the scars. But believe me, God will use your scars and you to live out a life of blessing that blesses others. He just waits for you to return to Him and ask for Him to control your life. He is waiting to give you Impossible Joy. Here is how:

1. God Remember Me.
2. God I turn my life and my will over to you today.
3. God, I obey your Voice as revealed in the Bible and in my "Fleeting Thoughts."
4. Obey God – even when it fights against your desires.

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