

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 21st June 2015
by Revd Barry Tabraham**

Theme: 'Happy in God'

INTRODUCTION

Over the past year I've found myself leading quite a number of study days, group sessions, and retreats which have all had a 'Wesley flavour'. And, looking back on these, it occurred to me the other day that I have been repeating **a particular phrase used by John Wesley** over and over again – so it must have some significance for me.

In 1742, in response to some criticisms that had been levelled against the early Methodists, John Wesley published a pamphlet entitled *The Character of a Methodist*, in which he said that a Methodist is one who is "happy in God". It's a most interesting phrase – and one that demands closer examination, because I believe it can (with a little help from 'JW' himself) teach us some important things about our faith and the way we live as Christians. So – what does this phrase 'happy in God' suggest to you?

These reflections, if you'll permit, are part testimony, part proclamation, and part exhortation.

(1) TESTIMONY

Psychologists and people who know better than me are divided in their opinions as to whether: -

- people are more likely to be happy as a result of *deliberate choice*, or
- whether some people are *pre-disposed to be happy*.

Experience suggests to me that (as often is the case) it's a combination of the two.

When I visited members, I have to confess that – if I was planning out an afternoon session of, say 3-4 hours – I used to plan to get the miseries out of the way first! You know – there are the kind of people who, when you ask how they are, revel in telling you about their calamities, relish in describing all their ailments and appear to glory in their misfortunes. And for some, personal misfortunes cause them to become embittered – often towards God, and they are often the kind of people who ask, "What have I done to deserve this?" Now, no-one would reproach any poor soul whose life has been marred by sadness from crying out in anguish. And I believe God never holds anyone to account if, in mental agony or physical pain, they shake their fists metaphorically at him. Even Jesus cried out as much when he hung on the cross.

But that is **not** the same as allowing personal suffering to twist and warp our characters, turning us inward so that we become either over-pre-occupied with our own troubles at the expense of others, or becoming bitter, negative people – particularly as we grow older.

However, for other people – as you know well – suffering has actually strengthened their faith.

And I must confess, I always used to leave a couple of these folk until last in my afternoon's visiting – if only so that I could go home for tea and begin whatever lay before me that evening in a more positive frame of mind! I have lost count of the number of folk who bore significant pain, loss and personal tragedy not just with fortitude and real courage, but with grace, patience and even humour. They were an *inspiration* to me and to countless others, and perfectly fitted Wesley's description of people who are 'happy in God'. For each one, being 'happy in God' was not to

dismiss or downplay sorrow or suffering, but that in spite of what life might throw at them, in Wesley's words, 'God is the joy of his heart, and the delight of his soul . . .' And I do believe that this was the result of a **conscious decision** on their part.

I have been very fortunate in that I have had a very happy life, and I put it down partly to the fact that I am a 'glass is half-full' person, and partly to the encouragement and faith of the people whom I've had the privilege knowing – both in my personal and professional life. The only problem is that it has tended to make me rather impatient and intolerant of negative-minded folk – you know, the sort of people who always raise objections in meetings to new ideas, often with the comment, "*We've tried this before, and it didn't work then!*"

Well, if that is the 'testimony' part, what of proclamation?

(2) PROCLAMATION

I think sometimes we get into a tangle because we don't always think of the word '**happy**' in the way that either John Wesley (or Jesus before him) meant it to be understood. The word 'happy', I believe, originates from the Anglo-Saxon word 'HAP' which means '*chance*'.

In the **Beatitudes** the word '**blessed**', which is repeated nine times, is the Greek word ***makarios***, which can also mean 'happy'. But 'happy' in this sense is very different from the often temporary feeling that could be described as 'cheerfulness'. It is a ***blessing***, a gift from God, by his divine grace. 'Happy' in the context that Wesley used the word, is not about wearing a permanent grin on our faces; it's rather, about experiencing something much deeper – **JOY!**

If Wesley was right in saying that Methodists are those who are "happy in God", why should this be so important to Christians?

There *is* a sense, of course, in which our faith is deadly serious and about life and death issues. We'd all agree about that – and when Jesus said that he had come to bring 'life in all its fullness', the **opposite** must also surely be true, i.e. that life without God becomes merely existence.

When you read **the gospel accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry**, have you ever been struck by the number of parties he went to? Again and again and again we are told how Jesus went to people's homes, and shared in meals and celebrations. I don't think that this was because he was trying to be the leading socialite of his day, or because he liked party food!

Although there are also many occasions when Christ took himself away from crowds, to be alone and pray, **just try counting the number of stories and parables which Jesus told which lay stress upon the joy of God's kingdom –**

- **The Parable of the lost sheep** reminded us of the 'joy in heaven over one sinner who repents',
- the joy of the woman who finds her **lost coin**.
- And perhaps the most famous of all – the lost sons (or the 'Prodigal Son') – ends with everyone sharing the joy of the banquet (except, of course, for the fatted calf!)

We are meant to look beyond the bare details and see a deeper significance in what Jesus did, e.g.

- The **wedding at Cana** – where the new wine represented the ***joy*** of new life.
- When Jesus invited himself to tea at **Zacchaeus'** house the context was one of celebration.

People, whose lives changed as a result of encountering Jesus, all had something in common. Whether freed from the burden of sin, or released from demonic possession, or restored to full health, or brought to their proper senses – whatever the nature of what Leslie Weatherhead called the 'transforming friendship' – they ***all*** experienced a deep sense of joy.

(3) EXHORTATION

I said earlier that my thoughts went along the lines of ‘testimony’ – proclamation – exhortation. Having offered you some personal thoughts on the phrase ‘happy in God’ and proclaimed that it is about **joy**, rather than jollity – how do we get to the point that Wesley describes. In other words, how can **we** become ‘happy in God’? Can I give you a couple of very brief examples?

(1) **Joy in Worship:** Over the years, one of the main criticisms of the services I have attended (especially as a child in South Wales) is not that the preachers haven’t been sincere; not even that the sermons have been trite and superficial; but – worthy as many of our folk are, we can be **dull** at times! It’s not a matter of the preacher having to crack a succession of jokes, but rather to enable his or her congregation to feel a sense of **joy** in the service.

(2) **Confession & Communion:** As Methodists we have been good at confession, but we have been slow to emphasise the **joy** of forgiveness. As a youngster I rarely heard the words of Jesus – “*Your sins are forgiven*” – and even after we’d taken Communion (from the 1936 Book of Offices, of course) we prayed a very mournful prayer which included the words:

‘And although we be unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice . . .’

At least the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* brought back a sense of celebration to Holy Communion, and thankfully the current *Methodist Worship Book* has preserved this.

Those two examples are from worship, which should always enable us to show our penitence as sinners, but equally, always enable us to know and feel our sins forgiven and the joy and peace of God’s love. And that must surely be true, not just of our worship, but of our **Christian living, too**. Sometimes, in our earnestness to please God, we can give the impression to others that being a Christian is nothing but hard work, and that serving Christ is about being grimly worthy.

Another memory (sorry!) – this time from **Wesley College, Bristol, where the Principal, Dr David Stacey**, preached the last sermon of the year – a message of encouragement to us all. The sermon he preached when my own year left – well, I can’t remember the text or the readings Dr Stacey used, but I do remember the gist of the sermon (1984!) He listed all kinds of situations that we were likely to face – pastoral issues, leadership challenges, and so on. And at each stage he said, “*I can’t promise you success (or whatever) but I can promise you . . . JOY!*” And he was absolutely right – as I found out myself in my own ministry.

CONCLUSION

And so, how does one find this ‘joy’ in our Christian living?

Let **John Wesley** have the last word:

A Methodist is one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;’ one who ‘loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the delight of his soul . . .

He is therefore happy in God . . . He rejoiceth also, whenever he looks forward, ‘in the hope of the glory that shall be revealed . . . of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven . . .

It’s quite simple, really. As **Andrew Pratt’s hymn** puts it:

Best of all is God is with us,
Hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,
Faith is deepened, courage strengthened,
Grace received and hope reformed.

Best of all is God is with us,
In our joy and in our pain,
Till that final acclamation:
'Life is Christ, and death is gain'.

When we love God with all our hearts and minds, he becomes the joy of our hearts, and the delight of our souls. And then we shall know the joy that the world cannot give – and as his beloved children, be truly *happy*.
