



LESSONS for LIFE

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THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

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The Bible says *To rejoice always, again I say rejoice*. The scriptures call for us to celebrate life no matter what the circumstances are. The apostle Paul said, *I have learned in all things to give thanks, no matter what the circumstances I have learned to give thanks*. Jesus said in the Gospel of John, chapter 10 verse 10: *I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly*. I want to read you a second scripture reading from the Gospel of John, the 15th chapter verse 9. *As God has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. Rejoice always, again I say rejoice*. Jesus said, *I want my joy to be in you and I want your joy to be complete*. So if religion is to be a joyful thing, and that may be a surprise to some, if faith is meant to give us that sense of life and celebration and abundance then why is it most of us don't experience that joy always? Why is it that most of us may even seldom experience joy in our lives? Why is it most of us, most people, go searching for happiness and seldom find it? Therapists who work in the area of addiction say that what happens for folks who are experiencing a low period in their lives is that they will often self-medicate with drugs or alcohol to lift themselves up, to get out of that rut that they're in to be able to find happiness that way. They also say that there are some folks, when they really experience happiness in their lives feel they don't deserve it and so they will medicate to bring it down, because they feel *I don't deserve this* and so they use drugs and alcohol to bring down that good feeling in their lives.

This series is meant to help us to take a look at the issue of happiness. It's meant to help us to take a look at some of the ideas, some of the tools that can help us experience what the Bible says – that ability to rejoice always. Excuse me just a moment while I get ready for the sermon (as he said this he takes off his glasses and clips them onto his gown). Okay. Now the print on this paper is a little small, so I need to get my glasses, so just give me a second while I try to find them. Where did you move them? They're not there (walking over to the other lectern). Ben, do you have my glasses? Does anyone know where my glasses are? Brian? Oh, thank you. He felt his glasses clipped to his gown. Now, as long as I looked for my glasses over there or over there or out there, would I ever find them? Would I ever find my glasses while I looked out there? I would never find them because they were here (holding his hand over his glasses and his heart) all along. Part of what we are going to be looking at over the next few weeks is the truth but the problem is the search for happiness. The problem is, if I might say to my friends to the south, *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* that's the problem. As long as you pursue it, as long as you search for it outside of you you'll never find it or seldom find it. This series will help us to take a look at where is it that happiness exists and how do we stay connected to it all the time?

I want to share with you a reading we're going to be using in this series in addition to the scripture readings. We are also going to be having a reading from the book that we're basing the series on that I'll talk about in just a moment or two. I've asked that they put the second reading on the screen because it's hard to get the reading just by listening to it because of the way the words play:

*No love, no fear. No joy, no pain.
No light, no darkness. No wholeness, no disease.*



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*No now, no past. No truth, no lies.
No God, no separation.
No self, no other.*

A reading from Robert Holden's Happiness Now

In psychology in the west, psychology has been basically built around solving problems; looking for an illness and trying to cure it; looking for a problem and trying to fix it. Now that is necessary in many cases, to be able to take a look at what's going on and how can it be fixed. What is the problem and how can it be fixed. But there's been a new movement building up over the last couple of decades called the positive psychology movement or the psychology of happiness and there have been a number of books written about this movement with titles like, *Authentic Happiness, Learned Optimism, Flow, Finding Flow* just to name some of the titles. At Harvard University in the psychology department the classes on happiness are full and what is happening at many of the universities now is that they're looking at this new movement called positive psychology. It is attracting a lot of interest - going beyond just trying to find the problem and fixing it and talking about things like love over fear, courage over being a victim, living a happy life. A few months ago – I'm a fanatic about being on a treadmill and elliptical machine; I have them in the basement of our home, and every morning I'm up at six o'clock and I'm on the treadmill and I spend an hour on it and have for a few years. One of the things I do is I tape "Oprah" and I watch Oprah while I'm on the elliptical machine and I read when I'm on the treadmill. A few months ago she was interviewing a man named Robert Holden and I was fascinated by listening to him talk. He's one of the people who's been involved in this psychology movement and has started an institute in England studying positive psychology, and so she interviewed him and talked about his book, *Happiness Now*. I was so fascinated that I went out immediately and bought the book and took it with me on vacation. It was the perfect setting as I had two weeks away, by myself. John was working and so I went away for two weeks by myself with this book *Happiness Now* to be able to read it and think about it for two weeks. It was a wonderful irritating book! It was wonderful in terms of its ideas and its insight but it was irritating because it kept pushing me to think differently and look at things differently; to stop blaming other people and circumstances and to take personal responsibility for my own happiness. It was life-changing for me and I'm going to share with you over the next few weeks some examples of how it impacted me.

However, psychology is not the only discipline that seems to be overly focused on the negative: Politics – where we see in politicians looking for the weakness and attacking those in opposition; churches focusing on original sin instead of original blessing. We see it in the public at large in many different spheres focusing on the negative. So, in the next few weeks we're going to take a look at happiness. Next week we're going to talk about how when you're born we often say *You are created in the image of God* – but what does that mean? What is your birthright? What were you given at birth that you may have moved away from and how can you reclaim that essence of who you are? The following week I'm going to talk about something that has been so misused and misunderstood it's almost not redeemable and that's the concept of being born again – a very very important concept, a very important spiritual concept of being able to be born again spiritually – not at all the kind of born again the Fundamentalists have distorted. So we're going to try and get back to the scriptural meaning. What did Jesus say when he talked about being born again. The following two weeks we're going to take a look at what Holden calls the positive and negative influencers in our lives. We all know there are things that cause us to be sad, that can challenge us if we say we want to be happy and rejoicing. There are negative things that happen to us and within us and there are also positive things that can get us off track. It's amazing how someone will come to church Sunday after Sunday after Sunday – they meet somebody, they fall in love and you don't see them for months! They get way off track. So how do we deal with the positive and the negative influencers, both the external ones and the internal ones? So we'll talk about those for a couple



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of weeks. And then on Palm Sunday we want to take a look at how did Jesus handle all of this? How did he handle the praise and how did he handle the attacks? How was he able to stay centred in the midst of the ups and the downs of life? On Good Friday we're going to take a look at what it means to die in our lives in order to experience life. Finally, on Easter Sunday we're going to talk about getting out of the tomb, how do you move into new life and how do you experience this happiness more often. So that's what this series is going to look like. During this series we've got some tools to help you, which I've already mentioned. We've got some Lent discussion groups and folks can still sign up for those tonight. Some of them are here at the church and some are at people's homes throughout the city. Also, there are resources on the Web site, resources that will be mailed out every week to help you to focus on the topics.

So, what are some of the key messages that we focus on tonight? Number one: As I mentioned the scriptures call for us to rejoice always, not just momentary good feelings, momentary happiness, but rejoice always. Jesus said, *I want my joy to be in you and I want your joy to be full or complete.* Secondly, there is this positive psychology movement. Robert Holden's book is based on great Christian, great Jewish and great Buddhist theology and bringing it all together and honouring these great traditions and talking about the psychological concepts and spiritual concepts together. Also tonight I want to emphasize how Holden talks about if we're going to explore the issue of happiness we have to remember that NOW is the key. Your happiness is not based on the past. Your unhappiness is not based on the past. Whatever relationship you've had, circumstances you've had in the past, good or bad, are irrelevant in terms of your happiness today. Negative influencers, positive influencers absolutely. We'll talk about that. They're influencers they're not deciders and your happiness is not based on *some day until...* You know, *someday you'll* – you know. I was going to say *walk into Woody's* – but I'm not sure that applies to everybody here tonight. I know it doesn't, and I don't know where the biggest lesbian bars are right now – sorry – and I don't know where heterosexuals go and hang out – I just know Woody's! Sorry, I should have thought this through before throwing it into my sermon!! Stick to my notes! Anyway, if you go looking and searching and think that somehow your happiness is going to come someday when you meet someone, some day when you retire you'll be happy, some day when you get out of debt you'll be happy, some day when you get into a relationship you'll be happy, some day when you get out of a relationship you'll be happy. It's not based in the future; those things are all irrelevant in terms of your happiness. It's about NOW, the now. Holden says, as I mentioned earlier, it's the searching out there for happiness that's the problem. Where do you start? You start right here. This is the place to start.

Finally, Holden says that happiness is always available to us regardless of the circumstance, and it can start right now. So I hope you can join with me over the next few weeks as we explore these issues, these theological and psychological issues together.

I just want to conclude this evening and reconnecting with last week when I talked about my cousin Scott who died at thirty-six. Yesterday John and I went to Burlington Ontario to be with the family, my Aunt Shirley, my Uncle Doug and my cousin Shannon and we went and spent some time with them because Scott had requested that there be no funeral, but they needed something and wanted something and so they invited me to come down to do a celebration of life with them together. So we went down and we remembered Scott and I asked them to share some good memories; I asked them if they had any regrets. We gathered around the table with all the cards they'd received – and Scott's ashes; and I asked them to talk to Scott. What do you want to say to him? They answered, *Well, I'd like to tell him,* and I said, *No, no. Tell him. We know that Scott's not in the box there but Scott can hear us now and you can talk to Scott and say what you want to say.* We had some prayers together and some readings together and afterwards we had lunch and after lunch they brought out this huge stack of cards and letters that Scott had written. My aunt had saved every Christmas card, every birthday card she'd ever got from him and she said, *Brent, I want you to see who more of who*



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Scott was. The letters and cards were amazing! Cards he wrote and he would say to his Dad, *You know, you are the best Dad a son could ever have. Thank you for being who you are.* Letters to his mum and there was one letter in particular that they showed me. Scott had muscular dystrophy and a few years ago, as it began to advance, he went through all kinds of tests – I don't understand all the medical technology but they did some tests about his lung capacity and they found out it was way below average and based on that and its deterioration they were able to estimate that probably Scott, at best, would live to be about forty. So Scott made the decision to move out of his home and live on his own. His parents were not happy about that because they were worried and concerned and they felt someone had to be with him and take care of him and how would he survive on his own when he couldn't feed himself or take care of himself in many ways? And he said, *No, I want to move out of home and I want to move out of Burlington. I want to move to Toronto.* So Scott came to Toronto and for eighteen years he worked for the March of Dimes and he wrote his parents a letter, and they showed me the letter. In the letter he said, *Mum and Dad, I know you don't understand why I made this decision but, medically I know I'll probably live to be about forty.* He did very well, he got ninety percent of the way. He said, *I'm okay with that. I've come to peace with that. I've come to terms with that; I'm okay with that but what I'm not okay with, I'm not okay with sacrificing the quality of my life now. I want to live life. I want to experience every moment of life that I can because I know that I don't have as long as you do. I can't wait for 'some day' to do certain things. I need to do them now and that's what I want to do and I can't do that unless I'm on my own.* Scott was the kind of person who, if you said, "How are you Scott?" his answer was always, "I'm fine. How are you?" He would always turn it around quickly to talk about you and how you were doing and in all the cards and all the letters you could see that here was a person who's enjoying life, loving relationships, loving new experiences. He had every piece of technology you could imagine in his apartment here in Toronto. His cell phone and telephone was hooked up to his TV, his stereo system was hooked up to his computer. His parents couldn't even figure out how to make a phone call because it was all so complicated how everything was hooked up, but Scott was living life, he was enjoying life. Even with all of the challenges he was able to find that place within that he had come to terms with who he was in such a way that life was a wonderful, wonderful gift to Scott!

I'd like to close this evening by asking you to pray with me this prayer that Robert Holden wrote in his book:

O God, help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is.

O God, help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is.

Amen.