



Lasting Happiness

By Craig P. Wilson

In the Book of Mormon we read, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). We also read in Mosiah 2:41 that we “should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness.”

Underscoring the principles found in these scriptural passages, President David O. McKay (1873–1970) taught that “happiness is the purpose and design of existence. ‘Men are that they might have joy.’ Virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping

The gospel teaches us that we are all created for a happiness that endures. How can more of us achieve it?

the commandments of God lead to a happy life; those who follow that path are not long-faced and sanctimonious, depriving themselves of the joys of existence.”¹

We often use the word *happy* to describe a momentary mood, feeling, or emotion. Although characterizing these bursts of positive emotion in this way may not be inaccurate, the Lord

and His prophets present a broader view of happiness: it is both the reason for our existence and something we can experience in a much more lasting, constant, and enduring way. Happiness can be a state of being.

Though the gospel teaches that all of humanity is engineered for lasting happiness and that virtually all are built to act with the end motive of happiness in mind, many seem to struggle to attain the state of being for which we were created. Why? Does living in an imperfect world, with all its difficulties and challenges, loom as too big a barrier, blocking us from this “blessed and happy state”?

Researchers in the field of positive psychology have dedicated much time and energy to answering such questions. As one writer has observed, “[Positive psychology]





Wants versus Needs

When we purchase something we want but don't really need, we experience a short-term feeling of satisfaction (a "chocolate high"), followed by a relatively swift return to our earlier satisfaction level.

asks, What makes people happy? What makes communities strong? What can we do to help our children, and ourselves, to pursue lives that have meaning and purpose?"² Consequently, positive psychologists have identified several traits or factors that are shared by truly happy individuals. Not surprisingly, what these researchers continue to discover through their studies are principles that have always been a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Following are some of the traits that seem to be common among those who lead happy, meaningful lives.

Satisfaction with Meeting Basic Needs

Happy people are content with having their basic needs met.

Researchers have found that across cultures around the world, being able to obtain such basics as food, shelter, and clothing (and to acquire perhaps "a little bit more") produces high levels of long-term satisfaction in people. Spending money beyond those basic needs, however, does not generally increase the level of long-term satisfaction. For example, one study reported that the average life-satisfaction level for the Inughuit people of northern Greenland was virtually indistinguishable from that of American billionaires, despite the enormous difference in material possessions and wealth.³ How could that be? Doesn't it make sense that the more we spend on ourselves, the more satisfied we'll be?

In actuality, the answer is no. Studies have consistently shown that when we purchase something we want but don't really need, we generally experience a short-term feeling of satisfaction (a "chocolate high"), followed by a relatively swift return to our earlier satisfaction level. In other words, just about everything we buy that we do not really need is rapidly taken for granted. Living on such a consumer treadmill, with its short-term highs, runs counter to our well-being and can divert us from

experiencing sustained happiness.

Avoiding consumerism is related to a fundamental principle of provident living, expressed by Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: "When faced with the choice to buy, consume, or engage in worldly things and activities, we all need to learn to say to one another, 'We *can't* afford it, even though we want it!' or 'We *can* afford it, but we don't *need* it—and we really don't even want it!'"⁴

Appreciation for Simplicity

Even when they live in a materialistic society, happy people are not ruled by the often mistaken idea that "more is better."

I once heard an interesting analogy that helps describe why the notion that "more is better" is often wrong. Imagine choosing your two favorite pieces of music and having the opportunity to listen to one and then the other. If asked to rate each of your listening experiences on a scale from 1 to 10, you would likely give both of them a solid 10, meaning each was highly enjoyable. However, if you decided to play both pieces at the same time, guided by the idea that "more is better," your listening experience would undoubtedly not add up to a 20 or even a 10. In fact, the experience would likely just produce irritating noise!

This phenomenon of finding

that more is often not better was expressed by one researcher this way: “When there are too many competing demands on our time and attention, our ability to be present is diminished—and with it, our ability to appreciate and enjoy the experience.”⁵

The evidence strongly suggests that in contrast to getting caught up in the culture of “wanting it all,” the practice of simplifying our lives can lead to greater financial peace and overall well-being. Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has extolled the virtue of simplicity as a means to “obtain relief from the stresses of life.”⁶ He has also taught: “One of the better ways to simplify our lives is to follow the counsel we have so often received to live within our income, stay out of debt, and save for a rainy day. We should practice and increase our habits of thrift, industry, economy, and frugality.”⁷

Dedication to a Cause

Happy people are involved in something they believe is bigger than themselves.

Whether through involvement in a religious organization or through working in a meaningful job, those who are happiest are able to lose themselves in a worthwhile cause.

Those who find satisfaction in the workplace often describe their daily work as a “calling” rather than a job or even a career. Individuals with a

calling see their work as contributing to the greater good, to something larger than they are.⁸

With this understanding in mind, isn’t it interesting that in the Church we are usually asked to fulfill callings, not perform jobs? One of the great benefits of activity in the Church is the sense that whatever good we do here contributes to our Father in Heaven’s work “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

Use of Personal Strengths

Happy people use their personal strengths to bless the lives of others.

What are our personal strengths? While we might be inclined to think of these as our talents (such as piano playing or woodworking), there are other kinds of personal strengths—what psychologist Martin Seligman calls our “signature strengths.” These include “integrity, valor, originality, and kindness.” They “are moral traits, while talents are nonmoral.”⁹ Dr. Seligman further defines signature strengths as “what parents wish for their newborn (I want my child to be loving, to be brave, to be prudent). . . . They would not say they want their child to have a job in middle management.”¹⁰

The more we are able to identify these signature strengths and find creative, meaningful ways to use them to improve life around us, the happier and more fulfilled we will be. To me,

the description of signature strengths aligns closely with the spiritual gifts and “fruit of the Spirit” described in 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 5:22–23, as well as in Moroni 10 and Doctrine and Covenants 46. These scriptures teach that spiritual gifts come from God for the benefit of His children. Indeed, the benefit for those who use their gifts to bless others is enhanced happiness.

Commitment to Relationships

Happy people foster close friendships and family relationships.

The Old Testament records an

Is More Really Better?

Imagine choosing your two favorite pieces of music. If you decided to play both pieces at the same time, guided by the idea that “more is better,” the experience would likely produce irritating noise!





Purpose

What purpose would our lives have if they included no challenges but were simply a series of undemanding, “ready-made breakfast” experiences?

interview that the patriarch Jacob had near the end of his life with his son Joseph, during which Jacob spoke of his younger days and of Rachel, his wife (see Genesis 48:3–7). Commenting on this interview, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner has written: “Jacob, coming to the end of his life, is saying, in effect: When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I wanted to be so important that everyone would know my name. I may not have done that, but along the way, I loved someone. I changed her life and she changed mine, and that meant everything. That made it all worthwhile.”¹¹

Positive psychologists might observe that Jacob’s commitment to family relationships undoubtedly improved his level of well-being. “In fact,” say psychologists Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, “the links between happiness and social contact are so strong that many psychologists think that humans are genetically wired to need one another.”¹²

Although having acquaintances and casual friends can be rewarding, it is the supportive, close relationships that are essential to happiness. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” clearly affirms the importance of creating and maintaining loving family relationships. It also pointedly reminds us that “happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³

A Sense of Purpose

Happy people focus less on transient, pleasurable pursuits and more on enduring, meaningful ones.

Depression has become increasingly common in all the wealthy countries of the world. Why is this so? Psychologist Martin Seligman suggests that one of the culprits is an “over-reliance on shortcuts to happiness. Every wealthy nation creates more and more shortcuts to pleasure: television, drugs, shopping, loveless sex, spectator sports, and chocolate to name just a few.” Noting what little

effort a ready-made breakfast required of him, he asks, “What would happen if my entire life were made up of such easy pleasures, never calling on my strengths, never presenting challenges? Such a life sets one up for depression.”¹⁴

Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has provided a gospel perspective on these matters: “While wholesome pleasure results from much we do that is good, it is not our prime purpose for being on earth. Seek to know and do the will of the Lord, not just what is convenient or what makes life easy. You have His plan of happiness. You know what to do, or can find out through study and prayer. Do it willingly.”¹⁵

One of the great themes of the restored gospel is agency and that “men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27). This is the path to a life of purpose and happiness.

Selflessness

Happy people strive to become more selfless.

Deciding to forget oneself and reach out to others brings immeasurable blessings to the giver. Authors Gary Morsch and Dean Nelson explain that “while the scientific evidence shows we are wired

toward altruism, there is still a choice involved. The beauty of the choice is that, when we choose to serve others, something wonderful happens.”¹⁶ And what kind of wonderful thing might that be? Morsch and Nelson describe what one group experienced after helping repair a building damaged by a hurricane: “They felt their lives *meant something* while they were doing something for someone else. They had helped someone in a concrete way, and it made them feel alive. They didn’t say it made them feel good. Lots of things can do that. This brought them to *life*.¹⁷

Selflessness
A focus on self is not the path to happiness. Rather, joy is found in surrendering our egos in service to others.



Such descriptions are strikingly similar to the Savior’s teaching that “whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33). Concerning the connection between service and happiness, President Thomas S. Monson has taught: “To find real happiness, we must seek for it in a focus outside ourselves. No one has learned the meaning of living until he has surrendered his ego to the service of his fellowmen. Service to others is akin to duty, the fulfillment of which brings true joy.”¹⁸

“There Could Not Be a Happier People”

The Book of Mormon provides an inspiring account of the people’s condition after the Savior’s visit to the Americas. Here was a haven of Christlike love and consecration in which the people “had all things common among them” (4 Nephi 1:3). Dedicated to living the gospel of Jesus Christ, the people had the love of God in their hearts, so that “there was no contention in the land” and many of the sins usually associated with this world were not found among them. The account then tells us that “surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God” (4 Nephi 1:15–16).

To experience such happiness ourselves is not an unreachable ideal. As we dedicate ourselves to living

the gospel of Jesus Christ, adopting righteous characteristics we observe in the lives of those who lead joyful, meaningful lives, we too can live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27)—the lasting happiness that God intended for His children. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. David O. McKay, *Pathways to Happiness*, comp. Llewelyn R. McKay (1957), xi.
2. Marilyn Thomsen, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” *The Flame* (magazine of Claremont Graduate University), Summer 2004, 15.
3. See Ed Diener and Martin E. P. Seligman, “Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 5, no. 1 (July 2004), 10; see also Robert Biswas-Diener, Joar Vittersø, and Ed Diener, “Most People Are Pretty Happy, but There Is Cultural Variation: The Inughuit, the Amish, and the Maasai,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 2005), 205–26.
4. Robert D. Hales, “Becoming Provident Providers Temporally and Spiritually,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 9.
5. Norbert Schwartz, in Tal Ben-Shahar, *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment* (2007), 152.
6. L. Tom Perry, “Let Him Do It with Simplicity,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 10.
7. L. Tom Perry, “Let Him Do It with Simplicity,” 9.
8. See Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener, *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth* (2008), 70–72.
9. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002), 134.
10. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 137, 138.
11. Harold S. Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters* (2002), 153.
12. Diener and Biswas-Diener, *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries*, 50.
13. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
14. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 118.
15. Richard G. Scott, “First Things First,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 8.
16. Gary Morsch and Dean Nelson, *The Power of Serving Others* (2006), 4.
17. Morsch and Nelson, *The Power of Serving Others*, 5–6.
18. Thomas S. Monson, “The Lord’s Way,” *Ensign*, May 1990, 93.