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THE GOSPEL PATH TO Happiness

*Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth,
and the life.” No one comes to true
happiness except by Him.*

In a phrase I am sure you have heard many times, the Prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44) once said, “Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it.”¹

It is that worthy quest for happiness of which I wish to speak. Note that I said “quest for happiness,” not happiness itself. Remember the Prophet Joseph’s choice of language: he spoke of the path that leads to happiness as the key to realizing that goal.

This is not a new quest. It has been one of the fundamental pursuits of humankind through the ages of time. One of the greatest intellectual minds the Western world has ever known once said that happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.²



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Henry David Thoreau said, “Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder.”

That was Aristotle, but note how presciently his statement parallels that of the Prophet Joseph—almost the exact phrasing. In the opening lines of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson immortalized both our personal and political quests by forever linking (at least in America) the three great inalienable rights of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” But notice in that magnificent troika that it is not happiness that is a right (like life and liberty) but specifically the *pursuit* of happiness.

So how do we “pursue” happiness, especially when we are young and inexperienced, maybe a little fearful, and life lies ahead of us as a challenging mountain to climb? Well, we know one thing for sure: happiness is not easy to find running straight for it. It is usually too elusive, too ephemeral, too

subtle. If you haven’t learned it already, you will learn in the years ahead that most times happiness comes to us when we least expect it, when we are busy doing something else. Happiness is almost always a by-product of some other endeavor.

Henry David Thoreau, one of my favorite writers from my university days, said, “Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder.”³ This is one of those great gospel ironies that often don’t seem obvious, like “the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30; D&C 29:30) and “lose your life to find it” (see Matthew 16:25). The gospel is filled with such ironies and indirections, and I think the pursuit of happiness is one of them. So how do we optimize our chance for

happiness without pursuing it so directly that we miss it? Let me go to a most remarkable book for some answers.

Living “after the Manner of Happiness”

The first 30 years of Book of Mormon history do not present a pleasant story. The hostility within the family of Lehi and Sariah became so intense that the two halves of their family split asunder, with one group fleeing yet farther into the wilderness, fearing for their lives lest they fall victim to the bloodthirsty quest of the other. As the first group plunged into unsettled terrain to seek safety and fashion a life for themselves as best they could, the prophet-leader of this Nephite half of the family says they “lived after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

In light of what they had just been through for 30 years and with what we know yet lay in store for them in the trials ahead, such a comment seems almost painful. How could any of this be described as anything remotely like “happiness”? But Nephi does not say they were happy, though it is evident they were. What he says is, they “lived *after the manner of happiness*.” I would have you understand that there is a wonderful key in that phrase that can unlock precious blessings for you the rest of your life.

I do not think God in His glory or the angels of heaven or the prophets on earth intend to make us happy all the time, every day in every way, given the testing and trials this earthly realm is intended to provide. As President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, once phrased it: “Happiness is not given to us in a package that we can just open up and consume. Nobody is ever happy 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”⁴

But my reassurance to you is that in God’s plan we can do much to find the happiness we desire. We can take certain steps, we can form certain habits, we can do certain things that God and history tell us lead to happiness with the confidence that *if we live in such a manner*, that butterfly is much more likely to land upon our shoulder.

In short, your best chance for being happy is to do the things that happy people do, live the way happy people

live, and walk the path that happy people walk. As you do so, your chances to find joy in unexpected moments, to find peace in unexpected places, and to find the help of angels when you didn’t even know they knew you existed improve exponentially. Here are five ways we can live “after the manner of happiness.”

Live the Gospel

Above all else, ultimate happiness, true peace, and anything even remotely close to scriptural joy are found first, foremost, and forever in living the gospel of Jesus Christ. Lots of other philosophies and systems of belief have been tried. Indeed, it seems safe to say that virtually *every* other philosophy and system has been tried down through the centuries of history. But when the Apostle Thomas asked the Lord the question young people often ask today, “How can we know the way?”—which for many translates, “How can we know the way to be happy?”—Jesus gave the answer that rings from eternity to all eternity:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. . . .

“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do. . . .



“If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it” (John 14:5–6, 13–14).

What a promise! Live my way, live my truth, live my life—live in this manner that I am showing you and teaching you—and whatsoever you ask will be given, whatsoever you seek you will find, including happiness. Parts of the blessing may come soon, parts may come later, and parts may not come until heaven, but they will come—all of them. What encouragement that is after a mournful Monday or a tearful Tuesday or a weary Wednesday! And it is a promise the realization of which *cannot come any other way* than by devotion to eternal truth!

In the words of then newly ordained Elder David O. McKay (1873–1970) just short of a full century ago, unlike gratification or pleasure or some kind of thrill, true “happiness is found only along that well beaten [gospel] track, *narrow as it is . . . [and] straight [as it is]*, which leads to life eternal.”⁵ So love God and each other, and be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Choose Happiness

Second, learn as quickly as you can that so much of your happiness is in your hands, not in events or



circumstances or fortune or misfortune. That is part of what the battle for agency was over in the premortal councils of heaven. We have choice, we have volition, we have agency, and we can choose, if not happiness per se, then to live after the manner of it. U.S. president Abraham Lincoln had plenty to be unhappy about in the most difficult administration a president of the United States has ever faced, but even he reflected that “most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.”⁶

Happiness comes first by what comes into your head a long time before it comes into your hand. Joseph Smith was living “after the manner of happiness” in a very unhappy situation when he wrote from Liberty Jail to those on the outside who were also the victims of great injustice and persecution:

“Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God. . . .

“The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth” (D&C 121:45–46).

“Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly.” That is not only good counsel against the modern plague of pornography, but it is also good counsel for all kinds of gospel thoughts, good thoughts, constructive thoughts, hopeful thoughts. Those faith-filled thoughts will alter how you see life’s problems and how you find resolution to them. “The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind” (D&C 64:34), the revelation says.

Too often we have thought it was all up to the heart; it is not. God expects a willing mind in the quest for happiness and peace as well. Put your head into this. All of this takes effort. It is a battle but a battle for happiness that is worth waging.

In a popular book a few years ago, the author wrote: “Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and . . . [look] for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining



it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness . . . to stay afloat on top of it.”⁷

I love the phrase “participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings.” Don’t be passive. Swim upward. Think and speak and act positively. That is what happy people do; that is one aspect of living after the manner of happiness.

Be Kind and Pleasant

Here is another. In preparing this message, I sat in my study for a long time trying to think if I had ever known a happy person who was unkind or unpleasant to be with. And guess what? I couldn’t think of one—not a single, solitary one. So learn this great truth early in life: You can never build your happiness on someone else’s unhappiness.

Sometimes, maybe especially when we are young and insecure and trying to make our way up in the world, we think if we can tear someone else down a little, it will somehow miraculously lift us up. That is what bullying is. That is what catty remarks are. That is what arrogance and superficiality and exclusiveness are. Perhaps we think if we are negative enough or cynical enough or just plain mean enough, then expectations won’t be too high; we can keep everyone down to a flaw-filled level, and therefore our flaws won’t be so glaring.

Happy people aren’t negative or cynical or mean, so don’t plan on that being part of the “manner of happiness.” If my life has taught me anything, it is that kindness and pleasantness and faith-based optimism are characteristics of happy people. In the words of Mother

If my life has taught me anything, it is that kindness and pleasantness and faith-based optimism are characteristics of happy people.



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Teresa, “Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God’s kindness—kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting.”⁸

A related step along the path toward happiness is to avoid animosity, contention, and anger in your life. Remember, it is Lucifer, Satan, the adversary of us all, who loves anger. He “is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another” (3 Nephi 11:29).

After quoting that verse in general conference a few years ago, Elder Lynn G. Robbins of the Seventy said, “The verb *stir* sounds like a recipe for disaster: Put tempers on medium heat, stir in a few choice words, and bring to a boil; continue stirring until thick; cool off; let feelings chill for several days; serve cold; lots of leftovers.”⁹ Lots of leftovers indeed.

Anger damages or destroys almost everything it touches. As someone has said, to harbor anger is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It is a vicious acid that will destroy the container long before it does damage to the intended object. There is nothing in it or its cousinly vices—violence, rage, bitterness, and hate—that has anything to do with living the gospel or the pursuit of happiness. I do not think anger can exist—or at least be fostered and entertained and indulged in—in a life being lived “after the manner of happiness.”

Work at It

Here is one last suggestion when there are so many others we should consider. Nephi said that in an effort to find happiness in their new land after their 30 years of trouble, “I, Nephi, did cause my people to be

industrious, and to labor with their hands” (2 Nephi 5:17). By contrast, those from whom they fled became “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Nephi 5:24).

If you want to be happy in school or on a mission or at a job or in a marriage—work at it. Learn to work. Serve diligently. Don’t be idle and mischievous. A homespun definition of Christlike character might be the integrity to do the right thing at the right time in the right way. Don’t be idle. Don’t be wasteful. “Seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Be industrious and labor, including laboring for and serving others—one of the truly great keys to true happiness.

Now, let me close by citing Alma’s straightforward counsel to Corianton. With all the encouragement a father would want to give a son or daughter, he said that in the Resurrection the faithful are raised to a state of “endless happiness” wherein they “inherit the kingdom of God” (Alma 41:4). At that time, he added, we will be “raised to happiness according to [our] desires of happiness” (Alma 41:5). But he also sternly cautioned: “Do not suppose . . . that [without repentance] ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, *wickedness never was happiness*” (Alma 41:10; emphasis added).

Sin is the antithesis of “living after the manner of happiness.” Indeed, those who believe otherwise, Alma says, “are without God in the world, and . . . have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness” (Alma 41:11).

Reject Transgression

I ask you to reject transgression in order to live consistent with the nature of God, which is the nature of true happiness. I encourage you and applaud you in your efforts to “pursue the path that leads to it.” You can’t find it any other way.

My testimony is that God, the Eternal Father in Heaven, is always encouraging and applauding your pursuit even more lovingly than I. I testify that He wants you to be happy, to have true joy. I testify of the Atonement of His

Only Begotten Son, which provides the right path and, if necessary, a new start on it, a second chance, a change in our nature if necessary.

I pray that you will know that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” and that no one comes to true happiness except by Him. I pray that someday, sometime, somewhere you will receive every righteous desire of your heart as you live the gospel of Jesus Christ, thus living “after the manner” that leads to those blessings. ■

From a devotional address, “Living after the Manner of Happiness,” delivered at Brigham Young University–Idaho on September 23, 2014. For the full address, go to web.byui.edu/devotionalsandspeeches.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 5:134.
2. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (1982), 31.
3. Henry David Thoreau, *Thoreau on Nature: Sage Words on Finding Harmony with the Natural World* (2015), 72; this quote has also been attributed to Nathaniel Hawthorne and to anonymous.
4. James E. Faust, “Our Search for Happiness,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2000, 2.
5. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, Oct. 1919, 180; emphasis added.
6. This quote was attributed to Abraham Lincoln by Dr. Frank Crane in the *Syracuse Herald*, Jan. 1, 1914 (quoteinvestigator.com/category/frank-crane).
7. Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006), 260.
8. Mother Teresa, in Susan Conroy, *Mother Teresa’s Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity* (2003), 64.
9. Lynn G. Robbins, “Agency and Anger,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 80.

