

ESSAYS

THE WAY OF HAPPINESS

Isaiah Beiter, O.P.

No one can fail to wish to be happy or to seek after happiness. But we are reminded on every side that we have not found it yet. We are still yearning and seeking after happiness, or after someone to bring us there. The question that we are left to ask, then, is eminently natural, and as the Psalmist witnesses, many are asking it: “What can bring us happiness?” (Ps 4:6).

St. Augustine offers us one picture of this search: his story of the City of Man and the City of God (I leave you to figure where happiness is found). I mean to tell the same story, but in a different way, and that in three points. The first falls in the beginning, the possession and loss of paradise. What made it so happy? The second is an attempt at recovery: a tower to heaven, an everlasting city. What were they trying to build, and why did it fail? Last comes the first-born son, the image of the invisible God. How is he our happiness? In each of these reflections, happiness is cast in a new light. Pondering them here, perhaps we will better understand the Way of happiness, and then we can answer from our hearts the question we face every day: “What can bring us happiness?”

THREE PARTS OF PARADISE

The word "paradise" originally just meant "garden," but now it names the home of happiness. Everyone knows the story of Adam and Eve, planted in the garden as the king and queen over all the earth, and we can take their state as our first example of what is fulfilling for man, the first image of happiness. At home in paradise, they were at peace with each other and with God, who provided everything they needed. But when the serpent offered a different image of happiness, Eve began to think there might be more, and our parents turned away from paradise. So God "drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen 3:24).

The reality of happiness was lost, but the desire remained, along with the memory of the garden as its image. Surely our first parents must have longed for Eden, and as they raised their children, the stories they told must have been of these happy days. Cain, Abel, and Seth doubtless wondered and yearned for life without the weakness and work, sickness and suffering with which they were so familiar. What was it about that image that would have grabbed their imagination? What does the story of the garden show us?

Let us look more closely at three parts of its happiness. (1) First of all, Adam and Eve were at peace with God. This implies knowledge of him, not only distantly, but as their creator, as their provider, as he who had given them all and set it in order. They trusted him, at least until the serpent's seed of doubt was set. Do we not suffer today, perhaps in our age more than any before, from a gnawing doubt in the goodness of creation and of our creator, a doubt whether living is even worthwhile? In turning away from our creator's goodness, from trust in his benevolent and almighty hand, we have turned away from him who sustains us, from life himself. How could there be any happiness but in life? (2) Second, they were at peace with each other. Division between husband

and wife, violence between brothers was beyond conceiving. Are not war and violence, especially within the family, now close to the heart of our unhappiness? (3) Third, they were at peace with all the rest of creation. They had no fear of poverty, exposure, or violence. Are not our present needs a great part of our unhappiness and difficulties? Some have nothing, but those who have much are filled with anxiety to keep and increase. Their unequal distribution becomes the occasion of division, and concern for their maintenance can consume our hearts.

Though we cannot simply return to the garden, looking back at it shows us some of what is necessary for our happiness. We look back at our parents' earliest home and see what we long for. Would it work to take these points as a blueprint, to try to build happiness for ourselves, or at least to approximate it?

TO BUILD OURSELVES A CITY

After the Fall and the Flood, there was a time when men began to travel west, in their hope and prosperity. Their imaginations grew, and having brick for stone and bitumen for mortar, they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4). These were men who, like any other men, desired happiness. They had some intuition of what their happiness required: a place to be at peace, unified, safe from the danger of division. They had a design; they had the technology to make it so. Higher than all the mountains, higher than all other men and all other nations, they were to be masters of all, to make themselves like gods. What would there be left to fear?

We can count here only one of those pieces of happiness seen in the garden: with this new dwelling, they could live in peace with each other. For the others parts, they made a substitute. Because they could not achieve peace with the rest of creation, they would set themselves over it and dictate their own order. They did

not turn to him who dwells in the heavens, but they were to dwell in the heavens themselves. Can such a substitute suffice? Could this be a new paradise?



Pieter Bruegel the Elder — The Tower of Babel

Imagine what would have ensued. Maintenance on such a tower must be almost impossible, and even if they managed to keep it upright, what are they to do when other men build their own city and their own tower? Through much strife and sorrow, they would have become divided and found their state worse than before they ever tried to build the city. But perhaps they would try again, to build a greater city, a stronger tower, ever improving their thoughts and designs, ever more in thrall to their own pursuit of happiness. So God said, “This is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Gen 11:6). Augustine reads a question: “shall they be permitted to do all they imagine?”

To the question, God gave a firm response. Lest man be resigned to such a fragile, hopeless happiness, the Lord introduced division. In his wisdom and mercy, he broke this merely human unity, this manly order and ingenuity. The story reads: “Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore, its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (Gen 11:7-9).

It was not that God does not desire man’s happiness, but that he desires us to be truly happy. He knows what we so easily miss: a part of happiness can never replace the whole. Nor was the problem simply that these men had too limited a scope, too small a blueprint. No matter how many tries and failures, how many years of industrious progress they might be allowed, men never have and never will imagine for themselves something to fulfill their happiness. And if we can never imagine happiness, how could we ever build it for ourselves? But if we cannot make it, how can it be ours?

It must be something beyond imagining.

THE WAY OF HAPPINESS

So if we must leave off imitating the garden, where can we turn to find rest for our hearts? Let us look once more at the beginning, where our hearts come from. God made us with an end in mind, giving a direction to our hearts in his charter of our existence: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

Alone, this recognition does not solve the problem, but it does recast it: our happiness must be in knowing God and living as he does. But who has seen God? How can we live his life? The garden gave us a first image to consider, but this way is closed to us. We have seen what happens when we try to build it for ourselves.

With no help, we are left to pine after a happiness we cannot even imagine, never finding rest. It is with all this in mind, knowing man's history of alienation from happiness, that we receive the proclamation of the Gospel. "No one has ever seen God: the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

The only solution to the problem that we have considered is in God revealing himself to us, making us to know him and share in his life. He has done so over a long history, brought to fullness in Christ, himself the living God. For, marvelously, he is also fully man: he has a heart of flesh, he knows our desire for life, for happiness. He knows this desire because it is his desire as well as ours, and it is most wonderfully in him that these desires are answered. He is full and more than full of happiness, and "from his fullness we have all received" (Jn 1:16).

But if happiness is in Christ, our analysis of the garden seems to break down. Is it not just the first part of happiness that is here filled to overflowing? What of the other two, peace with men and with the whole of creation? Christ suffered hatred, was cast out of the city and put to death. He was not rich, had no defense or place to lay his head. Rather than an end of strife, we are told to expect hatred and persecution. Rather than paradise, the days of this life are marked with sorrow and uncertainty. Christ is the Way, but he says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). Does he lack something of the happiness of the garden? But how could the happiness of Jesus be incomplete?

Our conclusion is this: Christ does not bring us back to the garden, asking the cherubim to stay the sword and step aside. He offers us to live a happiness even deeper, to share in the happiness that is his very own inheritance. He reveals this happiness to us, but also what it will require: we must set aside the building of towers and cease to design a paradise for ourselves. For this unimaginable, divine happiness, we must allow ourselves to be stripped of all the happinesses that we have imagined in its place.

God does not wish to allow us, any more than those architects of Babel, to be enslaved by the quest of false happiness, and in its place he offers unending life with him in heaven. All of creation is groaning in anticipation, and not only creation, but we ourselves are groaning as we await our adoption as sons (Rom 8:18-25). We await that perfect joy, united to all the saints, life at peace in a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth. And by our Baptism into Christ we are already made citizens of that country. The tribulation and patient endurance in the meantime is such little loss toward such a gain, for we must remember: no matter the securities we may be offered, “Here we have no lasting city” (Heb 13:14). The world can offer us many things, but only Christ can bring us happiness.

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