

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The radiant life (Psalm 34:5)

Presented by Bob Smith

We live in a society that is strong on pleasure, but weak on joy. We are blessed with so many opportunities for entertainment, travel, recreation and personal fulfilment. No previous generation was so protected from want and disease. We are more highly educated and enjoy a degree of comfort in life that, as little as a century ago, was unknown even to the wealthy. Yet whether we are significantly happier than our forebears is very doubtful; indeed, considering the number of people suffering today from depression and the rate of suicide and attempted suicide, many would say that we are less happy than previous generations. Most people agree that joy and happiness is the great goal to which we all aspire; “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” as the American Declaration of Independence put it. We all agree on the goal. The problem is how to achieve it.

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From the beginning, people with deeper insight have taught that our basic problem is a tendency to look for the answers to life in the wrong places. For most of us, the search for happiness means a feverish pursuit of success, which is usually identified with accumulating money and status. Even though life teaches us that it is a futile exercise, most of us never stop doing it. Indeed, one of the great sadnesses of life is to reach a goal that we thought would bring us happiness and then find it doesn't.

I remember a billboard I used to see from the train on my way to work, when I was in my late teens. The caption read, ‘Happiness is a new Holden.’ That message must have registered on my mind because I spent the next ten years dreaming about the day when I would have a new Holden. I also remember the day I finally achieved that dream and the excitement of it – as well as the fear of someone scratching the duco or denting my pride and joy. But after a while the pleasure wore off, as it does for us all, and I found myself dreaming of a newer model. Well, since those days, I have been fortunate enough to buy several new cars; each of them better than the previous one. Today, I'm quite blasé about it. It's nothing more to me than a decision about transport and finance. I, like many of you, have learned that a new car is not the secret of life.

For some of us the search for happiness follows the pursuit of status and success. We drive ourselves to reach the top, whatever that might be, only to discover, if we get there, that it's not what we'd expected. There was a rather insightful Leunig cartoon, a couple of years ago, that pictured his little man climbing the ladder of success, and when he reached the top he looked out into the nothingness of space and said sadly, “There's nothing there.”

There's nothing new about this dilemma. It's as old as humankind. One of the most poignant expressions of this sense of hopeless futility was penned one thousand years before Christ by King Solomon, the wealthiest and most powerful ruler in Israel's history. Solomon was a man blessed with fabulous wealth, enormous power and great intelligence. In the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes he describes the way he set himself the goal of discovering the secret of happiness, using his great wealth, power and intellect to do it. Under his leadership, Israel achieved its highest point as a world power. Solomon built an empire that brought great wealth back to his nation and his own treasury. He ensured peace and prosperity for his people. He

commissioned great public works like the Temple in Jerusalem that became one of the architectural wonders of the time. He used his wealth and power to sample whatever form of material, intellectual or sensual pleasure his heart desired, including marrying six hundred wives and keeping three hundred concubines. Yet, at the end of it all, this is what he wrote; “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

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The wisest people have always known that the secret of joy is within us, not outside of us. We either have it within us or we don't have it at all. The Bible describes joy as one of the ‘fruits of the Holy Spirit’; that means one of the outcomes of having Jesus in our lives. Jesus taught that those who have faith in him receive the Holy Spirit and their lives become infused with His life. One of the fruits of this transformed inner life is the capacity for true joy, the sort of joy that is present no matter what the outward circumstances might be. It's the sort of joy that enabled the Apostle Paul, at a time when he was languishing in a Roman dungeon, to say, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.” If we have real faith in Jesus then His Spirit is within us. And if His Spirit is within us we have the capacity to know joy; because joy is a spiritual quality that comes from within us, not, as we often suppose, from the environment outside us.

But the crucial factor is whether or not we live with our hearts and minds centred on this spiritual reality. There is a wonderful verse in Psalm thirty four that says it all. It's verse five and it says this; “Look to Him and be radiant; so shall your faces never be ashamed.” Those who live with a constant awareness of that spiritual reality and life will be suffused with those spiritual qualities of love, joy and peace; the qualities that produce a radiant life. Those who stifle that spiritual reality will just continue to live with empty hopes that lead to emptiness of spirit.

Some years ago I visited a Christian Community group in the South Bronx, one of the most depressed and violent parts of New York. I had hardly settled into my room when I discovered that armed intruders had broken in to ransack the house. That was my introduction to life in the Bronx. After the intruders had departed one of the women explained the rules of survival to me; things like never riding the subway after dark, having my keys ready to quickly open the door and lock it behind me when returning home, not looking people straight in the eye on the street, but at the same time not looking frightened or vulnerable. I remember thinking to myself that this place was a jungle and how much I admired those young people who had voluntarily come to live and work here as teachers, welfare workers and nurses.

That evening, as we all gathered for dinner, Jack, the leader of the group read some verses from the Bible which talked about the “lines falling to us in pleasant places.” He then spoke about how true that was for him and how blessed he felt. I noticed the others all nodding in agreement. Then they joined in prayers of thanksgiving to God for how blessed they were – and I, who had been feeling sorry for them, looked round and saw joy in their faces. It was then that I realised something. They knew where it came from in a way I didn't. I thought it came from a nice environment, outside. They knew it came from the Spirit of God, inside.

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In the universal search for joy, our mistake is to look for it outwardly, in a more pleasant environment, a better job, a newer car, another partner. These things may well prove to be more congenial, but they, in themselves, do not produce joy. That comes from within. It is a spiritual quality that flows from a deep and intimate relationship with God's Spirit within us. “Look to him and be radiant,” the Bible says. Whenever that relationship flourishes, joy flourishes. When it is blocked, joy is blocked. So, what does it mean to “Look to Him.”

Well, firstly, it means a sustained look, not an occasional glance. We can receive a number of one-off vaccinations in order to protect us from lethal diseases, but that doesn't guarantee we'll enjoy health and physical vitality. That requires constant, day by day, attention to the basics of healthy living – the sort of food we eat and the quantity of it, the amount of exercise we take, the harmful substances we avoid, and so on. In the same way, that initial act of faith and commitment that brought us into a relationship with God through Jesus doesn't, in itself, guarantee that we'll enjoy the abundant life Jesus said he'd come to bring; to enjoy that we have to nurture the relationship constantly and live in its light. "Look to Him and be radiant." That means a sustained look, not an occasional glance.

It is also a believing look – a look of faith that, even in the darkest and most difficult moments of life, when it is very hard to feel joyful, acknowledges that God is still there and still holds our lives in the palm of His hand; and like the Psalmist, we can say, "Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him." It is important to remember that our being is a combination of the physical, emotional and spiritual; body, soul and spirit. What affects one affects the others.

There will always be times when, for one reason or another, we will feel down. But that look of faith reminds us that though down, we are not out; and this too shall pass. "Weeping may remain for a night," says Psalm 30, "But rejoicing comes in the morning." And, thirdly, it is an obedient look; the sort of look that acknowledges that the best place to be is in the centre of God's will. The sort of look that understands what Jesus meant when he said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given you as well." Do you want to know radiant joy in your life? It's all about where you look for it. But if you look to Jesus, constantly, trustingly and obediently, you'll be radiant.

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I started out by saying, 'Most people agree that joy and happiness is the great goal to which we all aspire. We agree on the goal. The problem is how to achieve it. The Bible gives the answer in six words; "Look to him and be radiant." Let me conclude with a simple illustration I once heard. If you want to get a suntan – and be radiant in different way – you don't have to struggle and strive, neither do you have to take special courses. You just get out into the sunlight, and the suntan follows naturally. In the same way, if you want to have radiant joy in your life you don't have to strive and agonise for success, status and sophistication. Neither do you have to indulge in esoteric practices or seek special illumination. Just expose yourself to the warm reality of Jesus' presence through his spirit within you. "Look to him and be radiant."

Father, we remember that Jesus said he'd come to bring us life and life more abundantly. Help us to look to him constantly, trustingly and obediently, that we might have it. Amen.