

What is Happiness?

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Whenever we talk about life, the question of happiness is always on our mind. And this question is not just an idea on our mind. This question is essential for our whole life and for the solution of all its problems. What kind of problems? Economic? Yes. Social? No doubt. Philosophical? Of course! Scientific? Definitely: why do we need progress in science and technology if there is no happiness? So, the question of happiness is crucial for all, at all times.

How does Christianity deal with this problem?

If we turn to the beginning of human history, the developments happening then would seem strange to us now. The first humans in the Garden of Eden seemed to be happy, but one day they suddenly felt an inner discontent. Was it because they were lacking something in their so-called “external life”? No, they were sovereigns of the earthly world; they reigned in it and had all there was in it for their needs and happiness. Nevertheless, they began looking for something else. They went so far as to taste the fruit God had forbidden, in full awareness of what would follow. How could this happen? There is a brief narration to us about the temptation by the serpent, who said that having broken God’s covenant, they would become gods. (*Ye shall be as gods.*—Gen.3:5). It would seem hard to understand how they could have fallen to this temptation! But here is an interesting real-life story.



Once there lived a man and a woman, who were peasant serfs. They often grumbled, accusing Adam and Eve of depriving people of heavenly life and causing them to live a life of hard labor, misfortunes, manifold chores and cares. Their master, an intelligent man, decided to teach them a lesson. He called this couple over and said to them, “From now on you will live in my house, and be fully provided for.” In response, the couple, looking suspicious asked: “What will we have to do?”

“Nothing,” said the master.

“What about work?” they queried.

“You won’t have to do anything—just stay in my house, enjoy yourselves, take walks, and eat and drink at my table.” “But there is one restriction: on the table will be a pot, and you may not touch it or look under its lid. Only I may lift the lid.”

The peasants decided that the landlord had gone mad, but agreed. They began to live like a fairy tale. Other people were working while they were having meals at the same table with the master or taking walks in his garden, admiring its beauty; in short, they were enjoying themselves and leading a life of leisure. But little by little they got used to this life style, and boredom started to overcome them.

They remembered the strange pot that and the prohibition not to look into it, which eventually turned into a real temptation for them. They began talking about it, pondering what might be inside... Gradually, thinking and pondering grew into a tormenting desire to find out what the pot contained. One day, they could no longer resist the temptation.



Indeed, thought is the driving force of our “acts.” That is why Christianity, with regard to man’s spiritual life, attaches much attention to the struggle with sinful thoughts. A thought that repeatedly comes to one’s mind can penetrate to the very core of the soul and become its master, turning man into an obedient slave. This is where sin is born. This is where all crimes and misdeeds come from—they are generated in the depths of human soul, and sins as such are produced when the mind and heart enter into agreement with sinful thoughts.

Only out of our profound ignorance and lack of comprehension are we unable to perceive this, continuing to identify only sinful acts as sins, while ignoring their very cause. “He hasn’t killed?” “He hasn’t stolen, or been unfaithful?” “He goes to church regularly and observe the fasts?” What a holy man this is, worthy of canonization will still living—isn’t he? But what about his thoughts, feelings, and wishes? Aren’t they important? If the soul is filled with dirt, isn’t this also sin?

Everything begins with thoughts and desires. For Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden it began with the idea of becoming gods. The same thing happened to the peasant couple. Both the man and woman just talked and talked about the master’s prohibition; but one day, when the master was away, they could not resist the temptation and decided to look into the pot, sure that the master would never know.

The moment came, and the woman lifted the lid of the pot, just a little bit. The man was hesitant and tried to stop her. “May be, we shouldn’t?” But the woman was resolute. “Leave me alone, I just can’t stand it any longer.” She lifted the lid... and a small mouse sprang out of the pot and ran away. In the evening, the master returned and saw the empty pot. His reaction was: “I have given you everything, your life was a paradise, but you have failed to follow one minor rule. And you would criticize Adam and Eve! Out of my house, go back to your hard labor, and earn your daily bread!”

I like this story, even if it never actually happened. The story clearly shows how one of the basic characteristics of human soul, like other natural and good features, is being distorted by sin. I am speaking

about man's ceaseless aspiration for Godlike perfection. This characteristic feature was distorted, and instead of seeking holiness, man's focus shifted to its consequences: knowledge as erudition, power, or glory.

Many people believe it is real happiness to discover something new, to get power (if only over one's own wife or husband); to achieve popularity and glory by any means, even if this might lead to a disaster. For example, give a little boy a toy with something squeaking inside and tell him that he may not dissect it. This will be the end of the toy. It is impossible for the boy not to find out what is squeaking in it—just impossible, and that's that! Grown-up men have "dissected" the atom, have broken into human genes... and ensured a "happy" future for humankind: instead of people there will be cyborgs populating the earth—if any life is left on it at all.

When we speak about the acquisition of knowledge, we are not referring exclusively to intellect, but of all aspects of human nature. In Biblical terms, acquiring knowledge means the *coming together* of the acquirer with the knowledge being acquired. In other words, acquiring knowledge is not our usual understanding of acquainting ourselves with something alien or unknown to us. No, this is not so! Real knowledge is achieved only if there is no such alienation, but when subject and object reach accord with each other. Such accord ensures fullness of knowledge.

If an object under study is something alien for the learner, there is trouble brewing. Likewise, man started to treat nature as something external, unfeeling, a dead object of study at his disposal to use in any way he might want. Hasn't just such treatment led to the ecological crisis? What only haven't we done with poor nature! And here is the result: we now cry over the ecological crisis, suffer from new diseases and from increasingly frequent disasters. This all happens only because we have ceased to feel and understand our unity with nature, ceased to see ourselves as just one cell among many others comprising one whole living organism—the universe. We have failed to realize that by mistreating nature we are mistreating ourselves; that we are, so to say, sawing off the branch on which we are sitting. The loss of awareness of our unity with the objects of our learning means trouble. This law is applicable to all spheres of human life.

As for Christianity, the Gospel offers a very interesting definition of the goal of human life: *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent* (Jn.17:3).

That they might know! What is so extraordinary about this statement? If we approach God as an external object, existing somewhere far outside of us, then we will see nothing extraordinary in these words. But if we remember that *knowledge is coming to unity* (with God), we will comprehend the true implication of *that they might know*, and a very different picture will unveil itself before us. It turns out that man can be one with God Himself! But because God is Spirit, unity with Him can be only spiritual.

Christianity explains what this Spirit is like and gives an answer unprecedented in history to this question. The answer is: *God is love* (I Jn. 4:8).

However, love is a feeling (it), and God is Supreme Being (He). This answer is Paradoxical indeed. St. John the Theologian, Christ's beloved disciple, said, "*God is love,*" and continues: *He that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him.* (I Jn. 4:8:16) What a wonderful truth: man is in God and God in man! Unfortunately, these words have become habitual for us (I am speaking about religious believers), and actually their meaning is lost on us and we do not pay due attention to this great revelation in the history of humanity. Meanwhile, this revelation is not a discovery made by the wise men of science and philosophy—they did not establish this truth. Although throughout history humankind has always been religious, people did not know this until Jesus Christ, *the son of a carpenter*—Who was uneducated

according to the reckoning of our world but who was the Son of God by the power proceeding from Him—revealed this truth to us.

Moreover, Christianity does not say that God *has* love, but rather asserts that *God is love*. Now it is possible to understand why the statement “*that they might know thee*” is the Christian answer to the question about happiness. Isn’t it the ultimate happiness for people to be in communion with the One Who is Love? Because coming to unity with God is an ongoing process; being in Him is an incessant partaking of blissfulness. St. Isaac the Syrian wrote, “Heaven is God’s love, where there is delight in all blessings.”



St. Seraphim of Sarov

I would like to say a few words about people who acquired this perception of God and did come to that unity with Him which filled their souls with Godly love. St. Seraphim of Sarov never failed to greet people he met with the heartfelt words, “My Joy!” What does this greeting imply? When somebody meets somebody dear, is it not joy that he feels? So these words of St. Seraphim witnessed the love he felt in his heart. Joy is happiness, isn’t it? He cannot help greeting people as he did, for these words were coming from his heart, out of an abundance of love. The people saw the love emanating from St. Seraphim and were amazed, feeling it directed toward them. In fact, it is lack of love that causes suffering more than anything else. This refers first of all to our lack of love for our neighbors. We usually want other people to love us while we remain closed, behind an unbreakable armor of egoism.

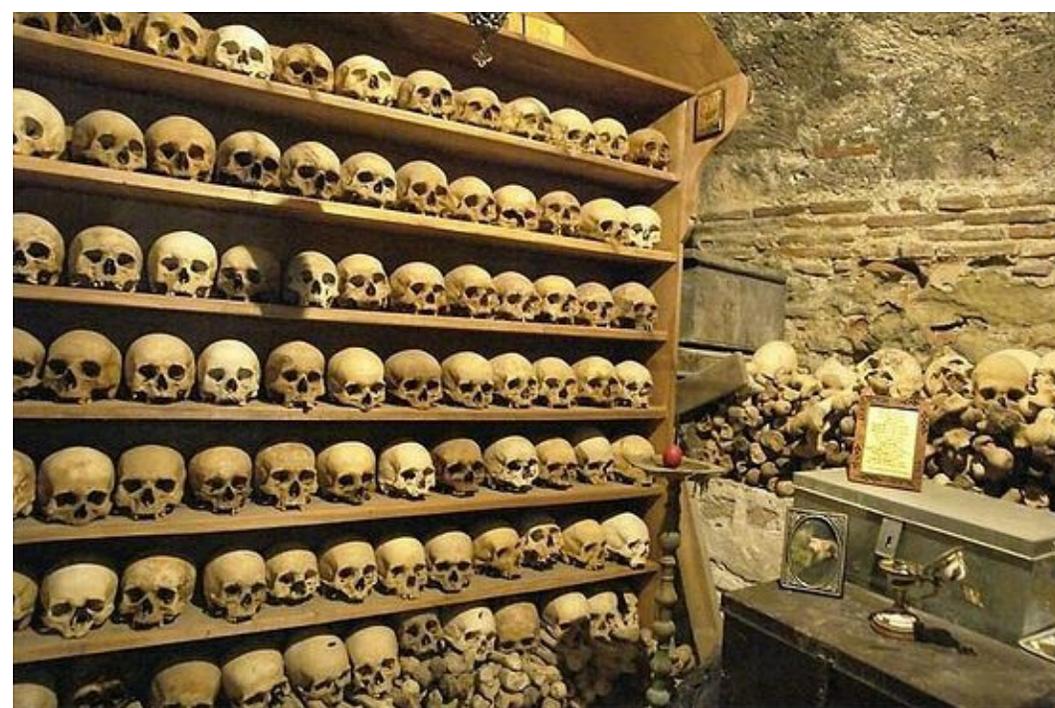
St. Isaac the Syrian, who lived in the seventh century, wrote that he who has acquired true love has a heart overflowing with love for all creation—for people, birds, and animals alike. This is the kind of love that compelled him to offer incessant, tearful prayer for animals, as well as for enemies of the truth, and for those who did him harm, so that they might be preserved and purified.

The Gospel says to us: *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life* (Jn. 3:16).

However, the love of which the Gospel speaks is not that feeling familiar to us that flares up one moment and vanishes the next. How often is this kind of romantic love really nothing more than veiled egoism, which soon turns into hatred! Pledges of everlasting love are quickly followed by hatred and divorce. Why is this so? This happens because we will love only those who love us. But is that love, or is it egoism?

Divine love in man is a Godlike state that embraces the whole person; this feeling does not divide people into friends and enemies, into insiders and outsiders, into believers and non-believers. This is a state where there is no room for egoism. In this regard, the Lord said: *That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his son to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.* (Mt. 5: 45). It does not even seem right to call this love happiness, for it surpasses all human feelings. Happiness in our understanding is something closer to earth; it is only a shadow of what reveals itself in man (not to man, but inside man), as he comes into communion with God. The Apostle Paul wrote, *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him* (I Cor. 2:9). Christ said, *The kingdom of God is within you* (Lk. 17:21). This is where the precious box containing the treasure of happiness is hidden! It is not to be looked for in riches, nor in glory or high position—it is to be found in the purity of the heart capable of being in God and with God—Who is Love.

It is very important to remember this, because when it is time to leave this world, and when our soul comes before the Throne of God, all things will be revealed—all that we aspired to, desired, achieved, dreamed about; how we treated other people; our slyness and hypocrisy, lies and hatred—all will be out in the open! What shame will be on us when all this is manifest! Even though we might believe that it will happen, we do not want to know it.



Great Meteor Monastery Ossuary

So much for the “great” human intellect! What kind of intellect is it, if, knowing that death is inevitable, it allows its owner, man, to live as if his life on earth will last forever, not thinking about the inevitable end, not asking why and for what he is living. Isn’t it clear that first of all, everyone should answer this most important question of life and concentrate all efforts on solving it?

But... they don’t. The vanity, even emptiness of life continues to prevail over it. It is the same things day by day; going from empty to vacant, and there is no time to think about the most important thing. Is this

what we expect the human intellect to be proud of? This is amazing! If one knows that he is approaching the brink of abyss, should he not decide without delay whether to stop and be saved or to jump headlong into it? There are only two options: one is to choose eternal death, the other, to look for and embark on the way of life. Christianity affirms that after the death of the body the human soul does not die, but moves on to eternal life. For those who sought the selfless love, goodness, righteousness, and truth that is God, it will be a blissful life—or *happiness*, to use our term.

What does the second option promise? If there is no God or everlasting life, then eternal death awaits us. It seems impossible to imagine a greater horror. This is why there are so many suicides. Russia's suicide rate is already one of the highest in the world. I think this might be explained by the fact that our people, with their faith rooted in the innermost depths of their being, must feel very acutely that life without God is devoid of any sense. Some people come to this perception conscientiously, others unconscientiously, but many feel it, especially children. This is the root of all our troubles.

Christianity unambiguously states: Man, your happiness is “within you” and nowhere else. It is in your heart, in your soul, and the way to it is open. Christ has given us what nobody ever gave us. He has opened the real way for man to come into communion with God. Even more, He says that by God's grace people can really become sons and daughters of God. The Mother of God has become even more honorable than cherubim and seraphim. This is the dignity and happiness for which man is predestined!

However, even among believers, very few seek such happiness. If instead they should happen to hear, for example, where royal treasures are hidden or where to find gold deposits, can you imagine what would ensue? (Do you remember the Gold Rush in America?) At the same time it is clear that all these things will have to be left behind, and nothing can be taken along to the grave. But when Christianity speaks of eternal treasure, the reaction is indifference. Happiness is offered to us, but we turn it down.

Do you remember Krylov's fable about the rooster and the pearl? What did the rooster do with the pearl? He asked, “What is it for?” We also do the same. “What is it for?” we ask, as if we are eternal on the earth. And we continue to live through grievances, troubles, and passions—boiling in this mess and dreaming away our days—dreams that never come true.

The history of mankind offers one of the strongest arguments showing that the search for happiness among material goods and earthly pleasures is senseless. It is not to be found there. Moreover, the more earthly goods, power, money, and pleasures man has, the greater the sufferings his soul will have to endure when all is lost; and lost it will be, for death passes no one by.

The Gospel story about the rich man tells us how he harvested a rich crop, and how, to preserve it, he decided to “pull down old barns” and build up new, “greater” ones; to have “goods laid up for many years” ahead. He wanted to say to his soul, “Soul, now with many goods laid up for many years, eat, drink, and be merry.” But a shocking warning followed, when God said to him: *Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou has provided?* (Lk. 12:20).

Why is he called a *fool*? Because his soul has become stuck, adhering to fleeting earthly wealth; he has fastened himself to a soap bubble—and don't try to tear him away! Just look what sufferings people who reached the highest level of material life have to overcome! There is a story about how a woman billionaire was dying. On her deathbed, she asked for her favorite dress, and when it was brought to her, the poor thing clutched at it and died the next moment. The clutch was so strong that it was impossible to unclasp her fingers. It was a mortal grip. They had to tear the dress and bury her with a piece of material clutched in her hand. What is to be done with such foolishness?

A Christian believer ought to have some trust in Christ and in His Good News after all. Any person, who is seriously thinking about the meaning of life should know what Christianity says about it, and what arguments prove the truthfulness of this religion; what it has to offer *in this life*, let alone life eternal.

It would be incorrect to assume that, while calling people up to Heaven, Christianity deprives them of the earth and its joys and good things. Nothing of the kind. Christianity calls people to struggle against passions, such as hate, jealousy, greediness, dishonesty and so on. Is it not clear that all our troubles are caused by our passions, and above all by our egoism and our pride? Christianity does not only call on us to struggle against them, but it offers an effective cure for overcoming them. It offers the healthiest mode of life—a life according to the Gospel, which, if a man follows, he acquires happiness.

Take, for instance, the most troublesome part of our existence—sorrows. Who hasn't experienced them? We all have many of them. Orthodoxy, meanwhile, asserts that God does not take revenge on anybody, or punish anyone. He is love! Whatever suffering befalls us is given by Him as our best and most needed cure. If we begin to take all affliction as a precious cure that we need for recovery and be grateful for it, as we do with regard to experienced medical doctors, we will soon realize how much Christianity gives us already in this life.

It is possible of course to behave like a foolish patient, who would say: "I don't want your medical treatment! Let me keep the bad appendix, I won't agree to the surgery; just give me a pain-killer..." and would die shortly afterwards. Therefore, St. Timothy of Valaam used to say: "By refusing to suffer, you fall victim to the demon." Enduring suffering, you will be with God and peace will be in your soul, because God is Love and the Healer, not the butcher.

It is easy to turn to a well-known doctor, who is kind to us and whom we know as an experienced and honest person, who will do all possible for our recovery. We feel comfortable and at ease. The same is true with our faith in God Who is Love, Who does not take revenge on us for our sins, but mysteriously cures our wounds that we ourselves senselessly and mercilessly inflict by our sins. It is left for us to decide whether or not to accept this cure.

We may decline it, grumbling and abusing God and permitting our madness to increase our suffering. Or, we may accept the sufferings as something that we have deserved, and with gratitude to God and repentance say: "Oh, Lord, I receive what I have deserved in accordance with what I did, for I know that my sins cause my diseases and sorrows, and You are not beating me out of punishment. I know that you continue to love me with all my sins. Forgive me and deliver me from them. May Thy will be done."

Such faith and state of mind deeply change our inner world, softening any sorrow, ridding us of our tendency to accuse other people and seek enemies to blame for our sorrows. Believers know that without God's loving will, nobody and nothing is able to cause any harm to them. People are only tools in His hands.

The perception of this truth makes it easier to endure any sorrow. Wouldn't it make a difference to a have good and kind dentist treat a toothache and not an executioner? The job would seem to be one and the same—but what a great difference there is in who does it!

God is not an indifferent judge, but a loving Doctor passing a just verdict. St. John Chrysostom says that if God were not love but truth, we would all be doomed; we are so exceptionally "good". Many other holy fathers also said the same.

The conviction that all sorrowful things happen to us because we have seriously injured ourselves by our sins and that God does not punish us for them, but rather out of His love gives us effective medicine to

relieve people's illnesses, is already a great consolation! Of course, this holds true only for people who succeed in enduring everything with tolerant obedience and love to God.

Orthodoxy is a great help for us in our relations with other people. Remembering what love implies, we can, as far as possible, learn to endure, to restrain ourselves, and to avoid quarrels; to overcome all kinds of misfortunes and maintain good will toward our neighbors. This is a good gift that Christianity offers to us even in our external life. Glory be to the Lord!



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If a Christian would begin little by little to compel himself to thoughtful praying—not just reading prayers, but offering assiduous, mindful prayer that is repentant and unhurried, his soul would be filled with joy. Many who did pray in this manner have experienced such joy. Prayer is contact with God; it is communion with Him. It works like a switch: press the “on” button and there is light. The more often we “switch on” prayer and the more frequently we resort to God, the more abundantly God fills our soul and, as a result, we come into communion with Him and become filled with His love. In this way, little by little, we become partakers of the everlasting happiness for which man is predestined.

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