

Carol Service

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I wonder if you heard a rather unusual news item in the course of this past week.

It concerned a minister of state in India, not of the national government, but of a state government, the state government of Madhya Pradesh, whose title is the Minister for Happiness.

Now that in itself is a rather curious position to hold, Minister for Happiness. The fellow who holds that position goes by the name of Lal Singh.

But the rather, what shall we say, disappointing aspect of the news item is that he was on the run from the police, wanted for the murder of an opposition politician.

So this is the Minister for Happiness, entrusted with making his people happy, and yet it would seem guilty of this very grievous crime.

[1 : 08] I don't know if this is being rather depressing or not, but I wonder if that says a lot about our race, the human race. We're not so good at happiness.

On the subject of happiness, a week or so ago I had a couple of hours to kill at the airport. I was waiting for a flight down to London, and I knew that I'd have a couple of hours, and so I bought a magazine just in the shop there at the airport.

And the magazine was a special edition of The Economist, The World in Numbers 2018. And it's quite an interesting read.

It tells you about the projections in different areas of economics and growth and what have you. A lot of guest authors with articles in the course of the magazine.

But there was one section in the magazine that seemed rather surprising and unexpected. It was a whole section, maybe three or four pages with five or six different articles on the subject of happiness.

[2 : 18] And apparently, as I read the different articles, the global financial crisis, whenever that was some ten years ago, led to a boom in what is known as happiness research.

And one of the things I discovered is that our own government, and also apparently the French government, are looking into ways to track what is known as, or what has been coined as, happynomics.

Now, you couldn't make this up, and your taxes pay for this stuff. But apparently, that is a thing, happynomics. But what does the research come up with?

This is serious research. These are serious academics involved in this work. Well, one of the reports that came out, this was a few years ago, and again, I'm taking all of this from the articles that I read in this magazine.

Back in 2012, the UN produced for the first time what was entitled The World Happiness Report. Much more recently, in the course of this year, 2017, Gallup, the pollsters, created an index of negative emotions impacting on happiness.

[3 : 32] So, what are those things that detract from or threaten our happiness? According to the research that has been done, and you can give it the credence that you wish, in 2018, the world will be a more miserable place.

So, we are reliably informed by The Economist. Now, we may smile at some of this stuff, but behind the questionable statistics are real hurting people, including our young people, our children.

The indomitable Esther Ransom, speaking on behalf of Child Life, a charity that she was very involved in founding, reports that in 2017, so in this year that is coming to a close, the charity has received more calls from suicidal children than in any previous year.

And the research that has been done identifies certain contributing factors to the absence or the scarcity of happiness. And there are three in particular that I noticed and wanted to highlight and maybe reflect on.

Three factors that contribute to the absence of happiness. One is isolation, one is dissatisfaction, and a third is insecurity.

[4 : 50] Now, there were other factors that were mentioned, but these are the three that I'm homing in on. Isolation, dissatisfaction, and insecurity. And I wonder if the Christmas story has anything to say or to offer in the face of this rather somber panorama, in the face of these factors that contribute to or steal us of our happiness, isolation, dissatisfaction, and insecurity.

Well, what was the very first thing that the angel said to the shepherds guarding their flocks by night in the fields near Bethlehem? We've read the passage, I bring you good news of great joy.

So here, at least, the claim is that the story has a lot to do, has everything to do with joy and happiness for us. And what was the good news?

Well, the angel continued, today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. And so Jesus is identified not only as the bearer of good news, he is the good news.

Of course, the thing is, words are cheap or can be cheap. Is it really possible that the one born in a manger 2,000 years ago could have something to say or even offer in the matter of your happiness today?

[6 : 19] Well, let's think about those three factors that the research has identified as contributing to our unhappiness. First of all, isolation.

Now the research, I imagine, and I'm resting on very brief articles that seek to summarize the research that's been done. No doubt there are those who have read more widely on this.

But the research would point to social isolation as one of these factors or as that element of isolation. Social isolation as families break down and we live ever more independent lives.

And of course, that is an issue. It's recognized, I think, very widely in society that isolation is an increasing problem. In our own country, in our own city.

And it is an issue. But perhaps the research is less likely to highlight the single most critical isolation issue facing us, that we are isolated from God.

[7 : 26] And the cause of this isolation is our sin. Sin distances us from God. It also distances us from one another. But what is this sin that we talk about?

It's a language that today is probably reserved for pulpits and religious context. It's not something we speak about in our everyday life. And it seems almost a very old-fashioned word.

But what are we talking about? Well, maybe it could help, at least in a measure, to get an idea of what sin is all about if we compare it to something. And I want to compare it this evening to microplastics.

Now, you weren't expecting that. But let me explain further. Maybe some of you have been watching an absolutely amazing and fascinating documentary on the BBC, Blue Planet.

And one of the episodes, I'm sure some of you have seen this, one of the episodes of this documentary series was on the effect of plastics, and particularly microplastics.

[8 : 32] So these are tiny little beads of plastic that are used in manufacturing, in clothing, and in all kinds of areas. And the effect of these plastics in the ocean.

Let me just quote something that was said in the program about these microplastics. Microplastics are now so pervasive in the ocean and are consumed by a vast number of sea creatures.

They have even been found in samples from the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of our planet.

The plastics that we use and the clothes that we wear curiously in the glitter that we use to decorate Christmas cards finds its way into the very deepest part of the ocean and pollutes and harms and destroys.

Even there, it's really quite remarkable. And sin is like that. Sin may seem a bit like plastic and straws and clothing that we wear.

Well, it's harmless. It's innocuous. And yet, it is all pervasive and reaches the deepest and darkest recesses of our soul.

[9 : 49] Well, how about a cleanup operation? Well, imagine if government leaders gathered at some summit, the G7 or whatever it is, and they came out with a statement and they said, we are going to clean up all the plastic in the ocean.

Within six months, there will be no more plastic in the ocean. We would all laugh. We'd say, well, that's ridiculous. It's impossible. You can't do it. And well, it's the same with our sin.

There's no cleanup operation that you could engage in that would reach the darkest recesses of your soul and clean up every element, every impact, every reality of sin in your life.

It's impossible. But the good news of great joy that the angel was speaking about and announcing is that this Jesus who was born in Bethlehem came to deal with our sin and so removed the cause of our isolation from God and each other.

He died on the cross, bearing the punishment of our sin and so is able and willing to forgive all who come to him. He can clean up the darkest recesses of your soul.

[10:58] And so, rightly so, the angel announced, I bring you good news of great joy. A second factor impacting on our happiness, according to the research, is dissatisfaction.

I think we know the feeling when nothing seems to satisfy. We're never happy with our lot. We're not satisfied with the way we look. We're not satisfied with our weight, with the shape of our bodies. We're not satisfied with the income that we have, with the car we drive. We're not satisfied with our partner, with the families that we're part of. Nothing makes us happy.

Or if it does, it's only for a moment. And so, we can experience happiness. Of course we can. But so often, it's fleeting and it passes. Again, in one of the articles I was reading there in the magazine that I mentioned, there was research about the happiness of Londoners during the Olympic year. And apparently, during the year of the Olympics, it was measured that Londoners were markedly, measurably happier than Parisians or Berliners.

[12:09] And it was attributed to the feel-good factor of the Olympics. Made people happy, on average, across that great city. But the research also discovered that by the following year, that feel-good factor had waned.

For a moment, people were more upbeat, were more cheery, were happier. But it passed as the event faded into the memory. I remember at the time of the Olympics, there was a lot of talk about a sporting legacy.

And I think in the year subsequently, many have said, oh, well, it never happened. That legacy that was hoped for. Well, certainly any possibility of a happiness legacy also did not come to fruition. Of course, we can think of this at a much more personal level about our own lives. At Christmas, no doubt, many of us will be happy, will be cheery as a result of the celebrations that we are part of. But will that last into January? Maybe even this carol service. Other research that I was hearing about, this wasn't in the magazine that I've mentioned, this was on the radio I was listening to just this past week, Oxford University published research on the health benefits of community singing, what we're doing this evening at this carol service.

[13:31] Let me just read something of what has been discovered, or so it is claimed in this research. Participating in music has been shown to be effective in pain relief, probably due to the release of neurochemicals such as B. endorphin, a natural painkiller responsible for the high, experienced after intense exercise.

There's also some evidence to suggest that music can play a role in sustaining a healthy immune system by reducing the stress hormone cortisol and boosting the immunoglobulin A antibody. Now, I don't know what half of these words mean, but it's all very impressive that community singing can make us happier. And I imagine that most of you, I certainly hope so, will return home this evening, cheery, having participated in this carol service.

But will it last when you have to go into work tomorrow? When you go into your car and you turn the key and the engine doesn't turn on? Or, well, we've got a thaw coming, but let's just imagine that there's a reversal in our fortunes and it's a frosty night and you're just about to get to your work and then your car slides into a lamppost.

I can't imagine that the cheeriness of this evening will last through to tomorrow in those circumstances. So we're dissatisfied and that makes us unhappy.

[14:52] Well, what about Jesus? Can He satisfy? Well, listen to the claim that He makes for Himself. We can quibble as to whether He has the authority to make this claim, whether He delivers on this claim, but at the very least, listen to the claim that He makes.

In John chapter 10 and verse 10, He speaks of why He has come. And He's speaking about those who follow Him, about His disciples, and He says, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly, that we might have life and have it to the full, a life that satisfies, a life with purpose and direction, a life that satisfies.

And many of us have discovered that in this claim that Jesus makes, Jesus delivers, not for a fleeting moment, but for a lifetime. And indeed, we are persuaded into eternity.

And so the angel proclaims, I bring you good news of great joy. The third factor that impacts on our happiness, according to the research, is insecurity.

We are afraid of what the future might bring. Will I lose my job? Will my wife leave me? Will my kids remember me when they grow up?

[16 : 13] How will they get on in life? Will they get a job? And we could go on. Will my pension fund take me through into old age?

Will my health hold? We feel insecurity as a result of these and perhaps other factors. Can Jesus help? The one born in Bethlehem. I said a few moments ago that the first words of the angel were, I bring you good news of great joy.

But I lied. The very first words were, Do not be afraid. The very first words of the angel announcing the coming of Jesus to the shepherd, Do not be afraid.

Jesus loves us enough to accompany us in our fears and is powerful enough to dispel our fears.

Those who trust in Jesus are described as those who shelter under the wings of the Almighty and there is no safer place in the universe.

No more secure place to find refuge. What do you need to do if you are to experience this refuge, this safety?

[17 : 23] Well, we are to respond to the invitation that Jesus directs to us. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. I will give you refuge.

I will give you security. And so the angel declared, I bring you good news of great joy. I guess the UN and Gallup and academia will continue to produce their research.

But I reckon that a little chorus that I learned as a child provides more light on the subject of happiness than the combined output of countless pollsters and academics.

Happiness is to know the Savior, living a life that's in His favor. Happiness is to know the Savior.

Happiness is the Lord. I wish you a very happy Christmas and a happy new year and a happy life, trusting in the Savior born in Bethlehem, the one who was and is and ever will be good news of great joy.

Well, let's sing in celebration.