

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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Virtue and Happiness

(Jerry Fite)

In a letter written May 8, 1825 to Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson answered Lee’s inquiry as to what thoughts influenced the writing of America’s Declaration of Independence. Jefferson, the principal writer of the document, conveyed the desire to be free from the tyrannical actions of the King as the prevailing mindset. He wanted the document “to be an expression of the American mind”. However, Jefferson went on to say that what was contained in the document were not things “which had never been said before. . . All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.”

Aristotle (384– 322 B.C.) wrote a ten volume work on Ethics, known as *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his writings he dealt with man’s pursuit of “happiness” and linked “living well and doing well” as instrumental in achieving the desired goal. Concerning the dominant goal of humans, He writes, “. . . for most people, as

well as those who are more refined, say it is happiness, and assume that living well and doing well are the same thing as being happy” (NE. Book I, Chapter 4). Aristotle recognized that men define happiness in different ways, but observed that all were united, refined or otherwise, in having a happy life. With such thoughts previously planted in the minds of our founding fathers, no wonder we read in the Declaration of Independence of “. . . unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

When we speak of “virtue” we are speaking of “eminence” or something truly praiseworthy. “Virtuous” living is “excellence” in living. God demands virtue from us and equates excellence of character with happiness.

Solomon sees the man who seeks God’s wisdom and retains it as being truly happy (*Proverbs 3:13, 18*). Reverencing God and having mercy on the poor are virtuous qualities connected with our happiness (*Proverbs 14:21, 28:14*). It is not

merely living life that will make us happy, but living well as a servant of God, showing mercy to others will result in happiness.

The virtue of suffering for what is right is an unlikely characteristic of the blessed or happy life. However, Jesus said, “Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (*Matthew 6:10*). Conviction of heart and courage of will is the excellent resolve in the face of frightful persecution. Many before us have chosen honor in death rather than deny God. By faith, they know heaven awaits (*cf. Hebrews 11:35*).

Adding “virtue” or excellence to our faith will move us to be the best we can be before God. With excellence we will grow in such virtues as “knowledge”, “self-control”, “patience” (steadfastness), “godliness”, “brotherly kindness” and “love” (*2 Peter 1:5-7*). With these, you will be living well and doing well. May we continue to have the freedom in this country to pursue our happiness as defined by our God!