

Winner: Senior Division
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"Joy is not in things, but is in you."

"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." This statement reflects a determination to be happy rather than complain or become despondent when circumstances are not favourable. Realizing the speaker and his situation, however, may cause one to take a second look at the statement. The apostle Paul, despite experiencing shipwreck and persecution as a missionary, was able to make this bold declaration because he knew that his joy came not from the circumstances surrounding him at the time but rather from deep within him. Like Paul, we can all experience true joy when we recognize that it is not found in external, uncontrollable things, but instead from deep within us.

We often hear the cliché, life is what you make it. I know of no one who does not want a happy life. However, life sometimes presents challenges that seem insurmountable - sickness, loss of loved ones, broken relationships, loss of homes, and lack of income. The question is, what does one do in these circumstances? Many people take refuge in material or inanimate things, such as their bank account, cars and houses, and other property. Some measure their well-being from the magnitude of their associations and society's monolithic perception of beauty. While there is nothing wrong with the possession of material wealth, does our joy depend on the abundance of things that we possess? Can we find the tenacity to hold in times of difficulty? Broadcaster Hugh Downs stated, "A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes." In today's world the pursuit of happiness has spiralled into a feverish endeavour for temporary gratification, which unfortunately brings us no guarantee of satisfaction. Conversely, with the right conditioning of the mind and self-control, the remedy might just be found within.

Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius said, "Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking." One of the central ideas

in Stoicism is that humans are able to control internal elements such as opinions, judgments, desire, and aversion. On the other hand, external elements such as wealth, health, and pleasure are not in our hands, thus it is useless to try to manage these factors. Essentially, Stoicism theorizes that a happy life can be secured regardless of wealth, status, or power. Joy is therefore available for every person, despite their position in life. Using the mental capabilities we are blessed with, we can access the determination to minimize our sources of suffering and focus on the positive aspects of our situations, thus experiencing joy.

The happiest people on earth are the people who have discovered the joy of giving. There are many individuals who are known globally for exhibiting the truth of this statement. Mother Teresa of Calcutta found joy in devoting her life to caring for the sick and impoverished not only in India but globally. Sir John Templeton, philanthropist and business pioneer, believed that the joy in a person has the potential to proliferate much more than any possession. He might have succeeded in business, yet his satisfaction was not rooted in his deep pocket, but in caring for others. Pastor Sunday Adelaja opined, “Eternal values are much more everlasting than the temporary physical material things.” The lives of these persons and several others support this testament.

The current pandemic serves as a perfect test of how we respond to challenges in life. Some people have reacted negatively to the many restrictions imposed by the government to control the spread of the virus, while some have adopted a positive ideology throughout. Perhaps if we were to pray like St. Francis of Assisi, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”, we would find the inner fortitude to overcome the challenges of money shortage, remote learning and social isolation. This strength indeed comes from within and not from things.

When joy is in an individual he or she is able to face the direst circumstances with a level of confidence that cannot be found in any other source. This topic resonates with me as my aunt, who, despite being told that she will have to amputate a foot due to cancer responded with such optimism that my family was marvelled. She told us that cancer will change her situation, but it will not destroy her life. Clearly, her decision to not become depressed in light of the doctor's prognosis had to be harnessed from an inner source, otherwise she would have been much perturbed.

Material things fluctuate in value and rarely result in true satisfaction. More meaningful, lasting, and reliable are our core principles, which emanate from within us. When we make accommodations in our lives for more than just possessions, then we shall truly find that joy is not in things, but is in us.

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