

Sweet Signals

By David Feddes

It's a gorgeous summer day, and you're relaxing in the sun. Your skin soaks up the rays, and you lie there without a worry in the world. A bead of sweat trickles down the side of your face. You start to feel a bit overheated, so you hop up and plunge into the water. The refreshing coolness washes over your hot skin. What a feeling! You spend a few minutes in the water. Then you get out and relax in the sun again.

After a while you again feel a little too hot. This time you deal with it by getting a monster ice cream cone. Mmmm, does that hit the spot! The ice cream is melting and dripping faster than you can lick it, but you do your best to keep up. Every lick of that delicious coolness tastes better than the last. As you swallow the last of it, you feel incredibly happy and content.

You've just had a religious experience.

What? How can that be? Soaking up the sun and splashing in the water and licking an ice cream cone—how can these things be religious experiences? What does ice cream have to do with God? Well, according to the Bible, it's got everything to do with God. Ice cream is a religious experience, a sweet signal from God.

For a lot of us, summer is a great time of year. Everything seems a little more lively and cheerful. We're outside more. We enjoy the fresh air. We talk with neighbors we don't see much in the winter. Children are playing and running and biking and rollerblading. The aroma of neighborhood grills is in the air.

Summer is a good time to get away from work for a while and do something special with friends or family. You can go water skiing, or fishing, or swimming, or rafting. You can roar along on your motorcycle and feel the breeze in your face. And to top it all off, summer is that wonderful, messy time for dribbling watermelon juice down your chin or smearing ice cream on your nose. All of these summertime pleasures are sweet signals from God. They are religious experiences.

If you're a churchgoer, it might sound sacrilegious to say that ice cream can be a religious experience. And if you're not a churchgoer, it might sound silly. Good food and good times, a religious experience? Come on!

But it's not just my own idea to talk about food and fun this way. It's God's. We all have times when we feel great, when life seems good, when our hearts are full of joy. Those times don't come our way by chance, says the Bible. They are sweet signals from God. They are religious experiences.

Inventor of Happiness

In Acts 14 the Bible describes the Lord as “the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them... he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:15,17). In other words, every refreshing rainfall, every crop and garden, every hearty meal, all good things that fill your heart with happiness—including ice cream—are sweet signals from God himself, displays of his character, proofs of his kindness and care, and invitations to know him better.

The beauty and bounty of the earth, food and fun and every moment of delight and satisfaction—how often do we recognize these as sweet signals from God to us? Sometimes we

hear that the intelligent design of the universe is evidence of the existence of a Being who designed it all, a God of great power and wisdom. That's true, of course, but how often have you heard that the good times you enjoy are evidence of a God of great kindness, a God who specializes in happiness? No doubt God is a superb Designer, but let's not forget that he is also the Inventor of Happiness.

Creation shows us a lot about the Lord who made it. In the first place, it shows that God is real. If the universe isn't everlasting—and only a tiny minority of scientists claim that it is—then it had to get started somehow, and something doesn't come from nothing. Somebody had to bring it into being.

And creation doesn't just show that God is real. It also shows that God is great and powerful and wise (Romans 1:20). When you gaze up at the sky and think of the countless billions of stars and the vast reaches of space, when you stand before a mighty mountain or a roaring waterfall or a towering redwood tree, you're overwhelmed by a sense of sheer greatness. When you study the patterns of nature, whether it's the intricacy of a flower or the order of a colony of ants, whether it's the unique crystal of each snowflake or the trademark swirls of each unduplicated fingerprint, you can only marvel at the astounding genius that lies behind it all. Who but Someone of unimaginable power and wisdom could bring such things into being?

The Bible says, "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing" (Isaiah 40:25-26). How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all" (Psalm 104:24).

So then, creation testifies to God's reality, his splendor, his power, and his wisdom. But that's not all. Creation also testifies to God's joyfulness and his eagerness to fill our lives with joy and happiness. It's good to see the designs in creation as evidence of a Supreme Designer, but then we must also say that fun and satisfaction are evidence for a Supreme Fun-Lover.

According to the Bible, God testifies to people, even to many who know little or nothing about him, by filling their stomachs with food and their hearts with joy. Why does the sun feel so good? Why does that ice cream taste so good? Why does that hamburger on the grill smell so good? Why does that lake or mountain look so splendid? Why do birds and brooks make such beautiful music? All these things are signals from a God who isn't just a genius or an architect or an efficiency expert. He's a great lover of joy, and his joy spills over into an outpouring of delight and fun for his creatures.

Why is the attraction between boys and girls so powerful and exciting? How can a husband and wife feel such overwhelming love and contentment just sitting next to each other looking out the window? And what about sexual intimacy? Who came up with the idea for that? Who dreamed up something so strange and yet so full of pleasure? Once again, it's God's idea. The Bible says, "...may you rejoice in the wife of your youth... may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love" (Proverbs 5:18-19).

There's also the joy of children and grandchildren. Why do we have families? Why doesn't everybody just pop into existence full-grown? Why do we get that feeling of joy and awe when we hold a newborn baby? Why do we feel so excited when we see Mom's nose and Dad's brown eyes in that little face? Why do we smile proudly when our little one smiles at us, or starts to walk, or babbles a few words, or hits a home run, or graduates, or gets a worthwhile job? Once again, it's all God's doing. The joys of home and family come from God (Psalm 127:2, Psalm 113:9).

And we've there are other forms of enjoyment as well. Who gives a student or scholar or researcher that marvelous sense of joy at a new discovery? Who gives you that feeling of achievement after you've worked hard all day and you feel like you really got something done? Once again, it's a gift from God himself. As the Bible puts it, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25)

Eating, recreation, falling in love, celebrating with family, feeling a sense of accomplishment—all these are sweet signals from the Lord about what kind of God he is and how "he is loving toward all he has made."

A Religious Response

You know what this means? It means that even if you never step into a church, even if you never open a Bible, even if you don't believe in God at all, you are having religious experiences all the time. God is continually sending signals and dropping hints and giving you a taste of his kindness and goodness. And here's something else you might not realize. When you have all these religious experiences, you're bound to have a religious response. Even if you don't consider yourself religious, you cannot help but have some sort of religious response to God's sweet signals. You cannot help but worship something and seek it as your highest good.

For some of you, your religion might be to worship happiness itself, instead of worshipping the God who gives you happiness.

Maybe your greatest happiness is physical pleasure. You live for food and sex and excitement. Let the good times roll! Eat, drink, and be merry! To you, pleasure isn't a gift from God. Pleasure is God. The Bible speaks of people "whose God is their stomach" (Philippians 3), who are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). But God didn't invent pleasure as a replacement for himself. He created it as a signal to draw us to him, as an appetizer to lead us to himself and find our greatest pleasure in knowing him.

Or maybe your greatest happiness comes from friends or family. As long as you can be with buddies, or as long as your kids are thriving and making you proud, you're happy. You can't think of anything you want more. But God didn't give you these relationships as a replacement for himself. These relationships are a signal to attract you to the best relationship of all: friendship with God and a place in his family.

Or maybe you're happiest when you're working and getting that marvelous feeling of accomplishment and success. What a satisfaction when your business succeeds, or when you get that promotion you've been wanting! If you're a workaholic, nothing matters more than feeling like you've done something important and moved up in the world. But God didn't make success as an end in itself. The satisfactions of work are just a taste of the joy we can experience when we work for God and do everything in partnership with our Creator.

God is constantly sending us signals, but we tend to misread the signals. We treat temporary hints of happiness as though they are the ultimate happiness, and we may even base entire religious systems on our misreading of the signals God sends.

In the past, when people want food and sex and pleasure more than anything else, they tended to invent gods and goddesses that symbolized these things. Some religions worshipped gods and goddesses of fertility. They put such an emphasis on finding happiness in created things that they ignored the Creator and worshiped idols who represented fun and fertility to them.

Today, there's a resurgence of nature and fertility and goddess worship. And among people who don't consider themselves religious, the basic principle of pleasure worship is powerful.

Other people have come up with a different type of religion. They put less emphasis on pleasure, and they put an enormous emphasis on the family. They exalt the family so high that they're caught up in ancestor worship. They pray to the spirits of dead parents and grandparents and other ancestors. They also put such emphasis on producing children who see family as sacred that a child who doesn't meet the parents' expectations is a disgrace. Around the world, many people still today engage in ancestor worship. But even if you don't, you might still, in a more secular way, worship your family instead of worshipping the Lord who gives you your family.

Then there are the religions that take work and achievement as the ultimate. The satisfaction we feel at a job well done can be exalted and made the very basis for divine acceptance. Do this! Do that! Follow this road of meditation, or that path of good works, and you can move upward from one level to the next on the ladder of religious greatness, the way a good worker moves up the ladder of success. Many people embrace a religion of working their way up to God. But even if you don't have any official or ritual religion, you still might see achievement and excellence and self-reliance as the supreme values.

These are all ways of misreading the signals God sends us. We take God-given clues, and instead of seeing them as evidence pointing to Someone far greater, we idolize the things themselves. No wonder John Calvin described the human heart as a factory for idols!

Some people, seeing how foolish it is to worship things rather than God, have responded by taking a very different approach. They say that the physical world is an illusion, that all pleasure is evil, that everything earthly is bad, and that true religion means rejecting all these things and seeking God in a spiritual realm that has nothing to do with this present world. Perfection is found in refusing all the best-tasting foods and drinks, abstaining from marriage and sex and family, living as uncomfortably as possible, and in general, learning to detach yourself from any kind of happiness in this life and learning to detach yourself from any particular ideas about God. True spirituality, in this approach, means total detachment, emptying the body of pleasures, emptying the mind of thoughts, and experiencing God as an impersonal void.

However, that's a terrible error. If God created all these good things, if he's the one who fills our stomachs with food and our hearts with happiness, then it's insulting to God and cruel to people to say that God's good gifts are bad. We misuse some of those gifts, true enough, but that doesn't mean the gifts themselves are bad. God's gifts are good (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Seeking the Source

We shouldn't worship God's gifts and become obsessed with them, but we shouldn't despise those gifts either. They are part of God's testimony to us. They are sweet signals, clues of his kindness. And they are invitations to find our ultimate happiness in the Source of all happiness. The good things of creation are appetizers for an even better feast that God is preparing in a new creation.

The signals God sends us can be very intense and beautiful and enjoyable. At the same time, though, they are limited and temporary. Happiness isn't something we can grab for ourselves or hold within our grasp. It comes and then it goes. And yet these hints of happiness awaken a deep longing for a greater, more permanent happiness, an infinite, eternal happiness.

The Bible says that God “has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 3:11-13).

Beauty, happiness, satisfaction—whether it’s in a sunset or an ice cream cone or a family outing or a sense of achievement—these are gifts from a God who beckons us from the outside with hints of happiness, and who stirs us on the inside with a sense of eternity in our hearts. God has designed us in such a way that we will find his good gifts enjoyable and exciting and inviting but not, ultimately, fulfilling. “God did this,” says the Bible, “so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him ... ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28). God’s purpose in sending sweet signals is that we will seek him, the Source of those signals.

So, when you experience intense happiness, you are having a religious experience, whether you realize it or not. And you will have a religious response, whether you intend to or not. You can’t help it. You can react wrongly, in a whole host of ways, as I’ve already pointed out. But why not pursue another possibility? Why not seek God and “perhaps reach out for him and find him”? That’s what God is signaling you to do.

How can you be sure of this? Well, the sweet signal of life’s good gifts is one way God communicates to us, but it’s not the only way and it’s not the clearest way. The Lord displays his reality and power and wisdom and kindness in the things he’s created, but he also communicates to us in writing through the inspired words of the Bible. And he communicates to us most fully in the Person of Jesus Christ.

We need the written Word of God to bring into focus the meaning of our world and our experiences. We live in a world created by God, but it’s also a world damaged by sin. Our hearts distort the signals God sends, and the creation itself sends a variety of signals. It sends us not only happy evidence of God’s kindness, but also painful evidence of his judgment on us and our world. We have mixed up minds and we live in a mixed up world which can fill us with intense happiness one day and horrifying sorrow the next. We have an innate longing for eternity, and at the same time we have a sure date with death.

How can we deal with such a variety of evidence? How can we see clearly when our vision is so blurred? Only by reading the Bible with the help of God’s Holy Spirit. Look at the world in light of the Bible, and it’s like putting on a pair of glasses. Suddenly your blurred vision comes into focus. You see how God has been kind to you all along, and the signals he’s been sending begin to draw you toward Christ, the Source of happiness.

As you seek God, you discover that he’s been seeking you all along. The Bible makes that very clear. And not only has God been seeking you and sending you signals of his goodness and talking to you in his written Word, but he has actually come to meet you in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This world isn’t just something God made. It’s something he became part of. He took on flesh and blood and became one of us.

God has many ways of communicating, but his fullest and clearest communication is himself, in the person of Jesus. God gives many good gifts, but his greatest gift is his Son. God has many ways of filling your heart with happiness, but these are just appetizers for the complete, eternal happiness that comes when your heart is full of Jesus.