

3 Common Words That Never Appear in the Bible (And What That Says About Us)

In [*The Mind of the Maker*](#), her brilliant book about theology and art, Dorothy L. Sayers discusses the differences between the biblical and modern attitudes toward life as revealed in the language we use. Sayers provides an illuminating quote from a Unitarian minister named L. P. Jacks:

“I am informed by philologists that the rise to power of our words ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ as the dominating terms of public debate is an affair of the last two centuries, and especially of the nineteenth...like ‘happiness,’ our two terms ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ are not to be found in the Bible—a point which gives to that wonderful literature a singular charm and cogency...”

The Bible never speaks of the things that afflict man as “problems.” It does often speak of sin; and in Christianity Jesus is said to have brought us redemption or salvation from our sins. But nowhere is the salvific work of the Cross described as the “solution” to sin. According to Sayers, “problem” and “solution” belong to the mathematically-oriented modern mindset rather than the morally-oriented biblical one.

But what about “happiness”—an age-old concept if ever there was one? One of the greatest ancient philosophers, Aristotle, gave a central importance to happiness, which he considered the end goal of human life. The Bible, by contrast, does not speak of “happiness” as such—perhaps a biblical scholar might delve into the linguistic nuances of “blessed” and similar terms in the original Hebrew and Greek—though it often speaks of “joy,” one of the signal characteristics which Jesus bequeathed to his disciples.

The difference between happiness and joy is often explained as the difference between something transient and something permanent. Happiness is a changeable thing, dependent on external events; joy is carried within and can exist even in the midst of external suffering. Perhaps it's no accident that in a number of languages the word for "happy" or "happiness" bears the connotation of "luck" or "fortune" (e.g., French *heureux* or German *Glück*).

Clearly, what was of paramount importance for the biblical authors was one's moral standing before God, regardless of our problem-solving abilities or the hand which fortune deals us in life.

We moderns, on the other hand, are constantly busy finding "solutions" to "problems," which will lead to greater happiness for all. Sayers believed that this modern vocabulary reveals a mechanistic rather than creative habit of mind, one that seeks infallible "results" that tie up all loose ends. Such language often causes us to evade the fundamental human questions and seek superficial—often political—fixes that amount to little more than window-dressing. (Sayers cites as an example the stopgap and ultimately futile measures to avoid conflict between the two World Wars).

The truly creative person will approach life not as a mathematical equation with a final and predictable solution, but as a "work of art" to shape and mold with one's free will. As a corollary, he or she will accept that perfect and complete happiness may not be materially achievable here on earth, but that we can still live with joy and faith.

That we no longer think this way shows the extent to which our culture has ceased to be informed by the biblical worldview. Perhaps we would get a clearer perspective on life if we started once again to immerse ourselves in the Bible's rich

language.