

Defining a happy life



Throughout time, countless people have sought to understand what the good life is and how to achieve it. One such person is Saint Augustine, who details in *Confessions* his path to achieving the good life through God. Throughout the book, Augustine seeks to attain the good life, however, he must first discover what it means. After much searching, he eventually does this, only to realize that it is not enough to simply know what the good life is. While in a garden in Milan, he learns that achieving the happy life does not come without great struggle. This struggle must happen because a person must strive to better themselves, be wholeheartedly willing to do whatever it takes to achieve the happy life, and undergo great internal conflict.

In order to attain the good life, a person must first know what it is. Although different people may have different beliefs of what the happy life truly is, Augustine's belief is very clear. To Augustine, "the happy life is joy based on the truth" (Augustine 199). He believes that in order to achieve a happy and fulfilling life, a person must achieve joy through the truth. However, a person seeking the good life through Augustine's definition must also know what they believe the truth to be. Augustine struggled for most of his life before his conversion to find not only what he believed the good life to be, but even after he developed his definition of the good life, he struggled to discover what he believed the truth to be. However, he eventually came to realize that for him, the truth was his faith in God. Therefore, Augustine views faith as his pathway to the good life. However, he also learned that this cannot come without significant struggle. Augustine believes that these trials were out of his power; the trials he underwent, the long path to his conversion were all predestined by God. However, whether God wanted Augustine to

endure and struggle for his faith or it was entirely caused by Augustine himself, it does not change the fact that in order to achieve the happy life, Augustine had to undergo great turmoil. Whether there is a higher power who intends for a person to struggle or they have autonomy over their path, their struggle will always be trying, which is what will lead them to the truth and therefore the happy life.

Despite knowing that his path to a happy life lay in putting his faith in God, Augustine is unable to achieve this goal for a long time. He learns later in his life while in Milan that he must not only know the path to God, but he must also struggle to follow it. One such struggle is the constant endeavor to better oneself in order to be ready for the happy life. Augustine's goal for self-betterment is to convert to Christianity and be of sufficiently strong moral character to be close to God. Prior to his conversion at the garden, Augustine knew that his path to the good life lay in Christianity, yet he did not convert because he was not pure enough, on one occasion praying to God " Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" (Augustine 145). Augustine wanted to convert to Christianity eventually because he knew that it was the right thing to do, but at the time he was not a sufficiently moral person because he did not wish to be chaste or continent. Yet while at Milan, after years of personal betterment and effort, he becomes sufficiently moral and he is okay with being chaste because he knows that it is the right thing to do, and doing the right thing is now more important to him than the satisfaction of his carnal pleasures. Prior to this, he was strong enough to resist temptation, but he only had a vague desire to do so. However, it was not until the Garden in Milan that he became sufficiently pure to truly value

virtues such as chastity above all else, and he truly desired to be the most moral person that he could. This is a severe struggle because Augustine must change his priorities and improve his character. However, by improving his character, Augustine is brought closer to god and therefore closer to attaining the happy life.

In order to achieve the good life, a person must not only struggle with self-betterment but they must also struggle with their will. They must ensure not only that their will is to pursue the happy life, but also that their will and desires align with it. Prior to his conversion in the garden, Augustine is not fully devoted to Christianity, which is why he did not convert prior to this despite believing Christianity to be right. He “ had not seen any certainty by which to direct [his] course” so he did not choose a course for fear of being wrong (Augustine 145). Therefore, he spent a lot of time struggling with discerning what the correct course is when he could have already been living what he deemed to be the happy life if he had wholeheartedly devoted himself to becoming a Christian. Then, while in the Milanian garden he fully devoted himself to his endeavor and committed to being baptized. Although he did not begin to live the happy life right at that moment, it taught him that in order to live that life one day he had to struggle with his devotion in order to become fully committed to his path to the happy life.

Augustine’s conversion was not easy for him; in fact, it was quite hard and trying. This is because he had to struggle with a great deal of personal turmoil during his conversion in the garden. While questioning his beliefs just prior to converting, Augustine was “ distressed not only in mind but also in appearance” causing him to leave his discussion with his friends and flee to <https://assignbuster.com/defining-a-happy-life/>

the garden in search of clarity (Augustine 146). While in the garden, Augustine tore his hair, struck his forehead, and was eventually brought to tears while trying to determine the right course of action when he finally opened the book of the apostle, leading to his conversion (Augustine 153). These physical actions manifest the internal turmoil and struggle he underwent not just in the garden, but also throughout his life in pursuit of the happy life. He ripped out his hair and beat himself in the head out of severe frustration caused by his inability to find the good life or christianity. This taught him that internal conflict and struggle is necessary to find the path to the happy life, as the anguish he was enduring is what caused him to open his bible, thus leading to his conversion.

This event, Augustine's conversion in the garden, is therefore crucial to the understanding of the happy life because it showed Augustine what he needed to do in order to achieve the happy life. He viewed the happy life to be " joy based on truth", the truth being his belief in God, therefore he believed that he could attain the happy life by achieving happiness through his relationship with God. For this reason, his conversion to Christianity is very important to his understanding of how to achieve the happy life. The experience taught him that pain and struggle can sometimes simply be a path to the good life and joy, therefore allowing him to understand that if he is able to struggle and fight through any issues he may be having, it may allow him to be happier in the long run.

Augustine's conversion to Christianity is already a crucial point in his life because religious conversions are significant parts of a person's life, but this also taught him more about how to achieve the happy life and that struggle

is sometimes necessary. However, Augustine's definition of the happy life is not necessarily universal, so some people's definition of the happy life may differ from his or their truth may be something other than faith in God.

Despite this, Augustine's lessons from the garden regarding the happy life also apply to other definitions of the happy life, because achieving the happy life will never be easy and will require struggle, but it will also always aid in the pursuit of the happy life.