

Steadfast, resilient, and increasingly happy (2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12)

There's a hard truth about existence in 2 Thessalonians 1 that social science bears out.

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Research shows that happiness is U-shaped, bottoming out in your late 40s—making the unhappiest age 47.2, according to multiple studies.

I turned 46 this year, so if I'm statistically average, I'm nearing the bottom of the happiness trough. The good news is that from there, happiness tends to increase until the end of life. Contrary to what many assume, older people are happier than young people. Social scientists call it the paradox of aging.

You may object, as I did, that resources and life circumstances surely must influence the reported happiness of the populations studied. But researchers controlled for education and marital and labor status across 132 countries, including developing countries, and the U-shaped curve of lifetime happiness held true. It even holds true for apes. The consistency of the U-curve across cultures and even species suggests that the tendency to feel happier as we age is biological, not circumstantial. We're built for it.

I find it helpful to visualize life as U-shaped rather than as a seismograph of periodic catastrophes, especially at age 46.2. Not because a U-shape indicates an increase in good fortune across aging populations; it doesn't. Psychologists who work with the elderly say they simply tend to engage with the adversity they face more comfortably. When we endure hard times over a lifetime, we grow in resilience, and

more resilient people have higher rates of life satisfaction.

This is interesting information to have in hand when I approach Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.

I'm wary of any teaching that implies that God desires human suffering, but I'm learning to dig for wisdom in the scriptures behind the harmful interpretations of my upbringing. Today's lection skips the most challenging bits—Jesus coming in a fiery flame to judge the people's enemies, for example. (When I read it in the form we hear on Sunday I thought of the scene in *The Princess Bride* when Prince Humperdink, rushing through his wedding to Princess Buttercup, urges the priest through gritted teeth to "skip to the end.")

But because we skip to Paul's words of encouragement for a community under duress, we miss the part where their suffering is key to their growth in holiness; it is making them worthy and enabling God to fulfill God's power in them.

I won't lie; I don't like it. It runs suspiciously close to the old saw "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." But there's a hard truth about existence here that both social science and Christianity bear out.

It's also a hopeful truth. Hard times will come, but when we endure them, we grow more resilient. Our increasing happiness is born of that resilience and steadfastness, which Paul marks as worthy of praise. With those gifts we can also become better equipped to act with empathy and compassion, and to fulfill, by God's power, every good resolve and work of faith.