

How to Live Happy



Gary Wilkerson February 15, 2016

Does God want us to be happy? That's a loaded question for many Christians. The church hasn't given a clear answer on it for over a generation. Yet from beginning to end the Bible gives us a very clear answer, and it's meant to transform the way we live.

Happiness is a relevant subject because right now people are unhappier than ever. That may sound surprising because of all the progress humankind is making. Economists tell us we're the wealthiest generation in history. People today have more money and means than ever before. We have more leisure pursuits and entertainment than at any other time. The thirtysomething generation grew up on X-Box and PlayStation with countless games literally at their fingertips. They could play one video game after another, in all their variations, and not reach the end of those games in their lifetime.

We also have more modern conveniences than ever. When my wife, Kelly, takes a trip for any length of time, I can survive using a microwave for any meal I want, breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Medical advances multiply year after year. Simple vaccines save millions of lives from viruses that would have wiped out multitudes a few decades ago. My daughter, Annie, is now pregnant, and we're able to make out the baby's physical traits in detail through high-resolution imaging. It was only a few years ago that Kelly and I were thrilled to see our own first son, Ashley, through an ultrasound—yet on the screen he appeared as no more than a blob.

In spite of these advancements, we're told by leaders in virtually every field—psychiatry, sociology, medicine, education—that this is the unhappiest generation that ever lived. Twenty years ago the average age of someone seeking help for depression was between 30 and 40. Today that age is 14. In just a couple of decades, what were once considered mid-life crises now plague adolescents with suicidal thoughts. Like the great acceleration in science and technology, there's an equal acceleration in maladies of the mind and heart.

Yet the problems I'm describing aren't restricted to secular society. The same statistics apply to the family of God—people who are saved, sanctified, filled with God's Spirit, know God's Word and are active in Christian community. Yes, followers of Jesus are unhappier by the droves—depressed, discouraged, anxious, discontent, lacking peace. Young people speak of being bored, even with thousands of digital entertainments within their reach. At the end of the day it all leaves them with an internal angst.

I can't say this any other way: Our joy is being stolen from us. When the Bible says that Satan comes to kill, steal and destroy, it's not just a warning to people about addictions or gross sins. The enemy of our souls wants to rob us of all that God has in mind for us, including joy, peace, contentment, vibrancy of life—and according to the Bible that includes happiness.

I find it sad that I have to convince followers of Jesus Christ that his design for them is to be happy.

Whenever the question is raised—“Does God want us to be happy?”—most Christians grow skeptical. They think this is the territory of prosperity preachers, not respectable ones. To them any focus on happiness is the stuff that leads to heresy.

Yet God does want us to be happy—unqualifiably happy. I don't say this casually. God's desire for our happiness is solidly grounded, a biblically based truth proven in Scripture from beginning to end. And this truth has been reinforced throughout church history by our godliest, most respected leaders. It's also proven by our own experience with God.

Yet I'm like most other Christians when it comes to this subject. We tend to pause when we're asked, "Does God want us to be happy?" When I told Kelly I was going to preach on happiness, she got quiet. Then she asked, "Don't you want to preach on joy instead?" I don't blame her for asking this because I asked the same thing of God when I felt him stirring my heart to preach on happiness.

As Christians we've been taught to separate happiness from joy. We're told that happiness is fleeting, based on circumstances, while joy is immovable, always within us regardless of our situation. But if we separate joy from happiness, we diminish the emotions God has given us. The Psalms express the full range of human emotions, from joy to rage to happiness to grief. And happiness is as much a part of our Christian life as is joy. Why? It's based on God's goodness—and God is good all the time.

Some in the church say our priority is to be holy above being happy. That doesn't make much sense. I grew up seeing the impact of the Teen Challenge ministry where addict after addict was set free from the horrible vise of heroin. What happened once they were freed? They got happy! People are happy when they're made holy and freed from sinful bondage.

Older Christians have told me, "Following Jesus is not all about happiness. After twenty years I'm more mature. I've learned I don't have the right be happy. God's purpose is for me to be holy." But that's a little ridiculous. Holiness makes us happy! It brings happiness because it brings freedom. Holiness and happiness can't be separated!

Of course, Jesus makes it clear that everyone who follows him will experience suffering. There is pain and sorrow in the Christian life. But through every hardship we know him to be trustworthy. He brings a joy—and, yes, a happiness—that the world doesn't know. And that happiness doesn't depend on our circumstances.

It doesn't matter whether we're right or wrong about the question of happiness because the Bible is absolutely right about it.

God's Word settles any question about happiness once and for all. Every modern, up-to-date version of the Bible speaks of happiness over and over. I'll start with the New International Version, a translation produced by respected scholars who've devoted their lives to preserving and understanding God's Word as it has been passed down to us. In their capable hands, the word "happiness" appears often and powerfully in regard to God's people.

"May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful" (Psalm 68:3). "For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor" (Esther 8:16). "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah'" (Zechariah 8:19).

The Holman Christian Standard Bible is one of the newer translations, also drawing on the best scholars and most current historical documents. It tells us, "Happy are the people who know the joyful shout; Yahweh, they walk in the light of Your presence" (Psalm 89:15). "I will turn their mourning into joy, give them consolation, and bring happiness out of grief" (Jeremiah 31:13).

The New Living Translation, another respected version, reads, "And look! I will create Jerusalem as a place of happiness" (Isaiah 65:18). The GOD'S WORD Translation reads, "The people ransomed by the Lord will return.... Everlasting happiness will be on their heads as a crown" (Isaiah 35:10). The following verse actually addresses the malaise of the present generation: "You didn't serve the Lord your God with a joyful and happy heart when you had so much" (Deuteronomy 28:47). Do you need a word on happiness from the New Testament? "Although you have never seen Christ, you love him.... You are extremely happy with joy and praise that can hardly be expressed in words" (1 Peter 1:8).

Altogether I found 2,700 references that speak of happiness, joy, gladness, cheer, delight, even pleasure. Each of these emotions makes up part of the amazing adventure we live in Christ.

The great thinkers and servants from church history spoke quite a bit about happiness in the Christian life.

For over two millennia Christian voices have echoed Scripture's clear teaching on happiness. You'll never find Augustine smiling in any existing portrait, but he wrote this: "There is no man who does not desire this [to be happy], and each one desires it with such earnestness that he prefers it to all other things. Whoever desires other things desires them for this end alone."

Through all his intellectual wisdom, Augustine knew that at the core of every human desire is the desire to be happy. He said God put that desire in the heart of man. In fact, happiness is the tool he uses to draw us all to Jesus. Christians live life to the fullest, with energy and enthusiasm based on their knowledge of God's goodness. This mirrors back to people the condition of their own hearts, and they realize, "What he has is real. My life is miserable by comparison. I can see I'm dying in sin. I need God!"

The Puritans were seen as sober and dour, yet even their leaders put happiness at the top of God's design for our lives. Thomas Watson wrote, "He has no design upon us whatsoever but only to make us happy." Thomas Manton wrote, "It is as natural for the reasonable creature to desire to be happy as it is for fire to burn." These words weren't penned lightly. The Puritan age was one of grief and hardship with most children dying in their early years. Yet in the midst of life's unavoidable pain and suffering, these writers declared Christians to be the happiest people in the world.

In later years, the missionary Amy Carmichael wrote of happiness amid some of the world's darkest and ugliest realities. She ministered in India where young girls were trafficked into sex slavery. Amy rescued them and sheltered them in her protective compound, which was regularly attacked. She herself was beaten by people who opposed her work. She described her days this way: "There is nothing dreary and doubtful about this life. It is meant to be continuously joyful, and we are called to live in a settled happiness in the Lord whose joy is our strength."

How do followers of Jesus in the Middle East endure horrifying attacks from ISIS? How do imprisoned Christians in countries hostile to their faith maintain hope? They have within them a joy and happiness that sustains them through it all. The Bible they look to isn't some positivistic, rah-rah book that fills them with false hope. It renews their minds, stirring within them what the Spirit has already placed in their hearts: that true happiness is a reality in our lives, given by God.

How do you regain happiness when it has escaped you for so long?

How is happiness possible when you're in physical pain, when you're troubled in soul, when your family is in shambles? Let me give you just a few helpful words: 1. You've been given biblical evidence that God wants happiness for you. Believe he wants it for you. 2. Believe that the happiness he gives is a solid reality, not pie-in-the-sky. 3. Renew your mind on this subject through his Word. Don't be robbed of his truth by the enemy.

Because we live in a fallen world, the slant of our minds is typically negative. Some of us tend to read the Bible only for the passages on sin and judgment while neglecting the many references to his love and the blessings of happiness. Yet even a natural pessimist can know happiness if he knows God. In turn a natural optimist doesn't have the same hope without knowing God. His happiness is built on sand, not solid rock.

Peter and John stood on a firm foundation of happiness when they sang songs of praise in prison. The apostle Paul did the same when he was in chains. Because God's love was established in their hearts, they were already free before God supernaturally delivered them from their bonds.

When your head is filled with negative thoughts—when you begin to doubt God's love for you and his pleasure in you—I urge you to do something very practical. Find a piece of paper and write down the thought you're having. Then read it out loud. Recognize how bizarre and unreal it is. Then write this down: "I am a child of my heavenly Father, who takes pleasure in me." That is not positive self-talk—it is reality. His Word makes it so. Believe it and find true happiness again!

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