



Finding HAPPINESS

God's Surprising Purpose in Your Life

R. Herbert

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**God's Surprising Purpose
in Your Life**

By R. Herbert

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Introduction:

What We All Want Most

It is no secret that everyone wants happiness. Why is it then, that in a world of multiple billions of people – billions of people desiring and seeking happiness – so few are happy or have more than just “some” happiness in their lives, as countless psychological and health- related studies have shown?

The truth is, although happiness is something we all want, perhaps above all else in life, most people look for happiness in the wrong places – or live in ways that destroy what happiness they could have. Many find some degree of happiness in the things they want and work for, but all too often that happiness is short-lived and shallow – never really being satisfying or long-lasting. In fact, most of us realize that we not only desire happiness, we all want *lasting* happiness and joy.

Relatively few people turn to the Bible to answer the question of where we might find such happiness, and even established and devout believers rarely focus on what the Bible might teach them about this important topic. Yet the Bible contains literally thousands of references to happiness – hundreds of verses that show us how important happiness is, where we can find it, how we can protect it, and how we can develop it in our lives.

This book looks at all these aspects of happiness, and if you have never studied the subject in your own Bible it may surprise you. Certainly it will help you see that the Bible shows happiness is not just a human concern – it is God’s desire for every one of us, and he has given us principles that we can utilize to increase happiness in our own lives and in the lives of others. In fact, we can say that the Bible shows happiness is one of – if not *the* – chief goals of life. If you do not believe that, or even if you do, read on. This is a book that will help you better understand one of the most important subjects in the Bible– and yes, if you let it, it will make you happy.

PART ONE:
UNDERSTANDING HAPPINESS

1. God and Happiness

As we begin this book on finding happiness, we must ask ourselves a question: What is our perception of God? More precisely, when we think of God, does happiness come to mind? Can the God who constantly beholds the sin, sorrow and problems of humanity possibly be happy? Can the God who compassionately shares not only our problems, but those of untold millions be truly joyful?

To some extent, many of us unconsciously share the common perception of God as a brooding figure focusing on whether we are obeying his laws or not. It's hardly a joyful image and is reflected in countless pictures of Jesus as the suffering servant weighed down with the cares and sins of humanity. Yet if we search the Bible, the Scriptures show God in a very different light.

The God Who Is Happy

In 1 Timothy 1:11 and 6:15–16, Paul speaks of “the blessed God.” The word “blessed” in these verses is from the Greek word *makarios* which means both “blessed” and also “happy” – as it is translated in 1 Corinthians 7:40 (ESV, NIV, etc.). So “the happy God” is just as acceptable a translation as “the blessed God.”

In fact, many other scriptures specifically tell us about God's happiness. Jesus affirmed “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7 BSB). Joy in heaven doesn't mean that the angels rejoice but God does not. Saying “joy in heaven” is like saying “dinner at the White House” – just as the president participates in dinner at the White House, God participates in the joy in heaven. We need to see this as a reflection of the personality of God himself: joy in heaven is synonymous with the joy and happiness of God.

Many other scriptures show that God's happiness and joy permeates heaven. The psalmist wrote "in your presence there is fullness of *joy*; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11 ESV), and the book of Chronicles tells us "Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and *joy* are in his dwelling place" (1 Chronicles 16:27). As C.S. Lewis wrote: "Joy is the serious business of heaven" (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, pp. 92–93).

And in case we need to be convinced that it is God himself who is the center of the happiness of heaven, the Bible shows us that God experiences delight (happiness!) in many things. For example, he delights in justice (Proverbs 11:1) and in the prayer of the upright (Proverbs 15:8), and he delights in those who hope in his love (Psalm 147:11). And think about the beautiful words of the prophet Zephaniah who tells us "The LORD your God ... will take great *delight* in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will *rejoice* over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17). God delights in his children, and of course, he is "well pleased" by his Son (Matthew 17:5).

The Happiness of Jesus

Considering the happiness that the Scriptures show is an inherent part of the character of God, it is not surprising that we find that happiness and joy were strong characteristics of the Son of God. Luke 10:21 speaks of Jesus being "full of joy through the Holy Spirit," and Jesus himself spoke clearly of the joy he knew in his life and that he wanted to share with his followers, saying: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11) and "I say these things ... so that they [his disciples] may have the full measure of my joy within them" (John 17:13).

Rather than being a sad and unhappy person, the New Testament tells us that even despite the painful death he knew he would suffer "For the joy set before him he endured the cross"

(Hebrews 12:2). These amazing words tell us that Jesus endured agony on our behalf because of the happiness he had and would gain – for himself and for billions of others – in doing so.

Jesus was full of joy and happiness in his lifetime and his parable of the talents shows that he will have great happiness in his kingdom. In this parable (Matthew 25:14–30) the master (symbolizing Jesus himself) goes away, leaving talents (an amount of gold) in the care of his servants. At his eventual return the master then says to each of the servants who had multiplied their talents: “Well done, good and faithful servant ... *Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:21; 25:23). Notice the master does not say “You have done well, so come and take on some of my heavy responsibilities,” but rather, “Come and share your master’s happiness!” This is the clear meaning of the underlying Greek in which this parable was recorded, and all translations agree on this simple meaning: the Son of God, like the Father, always was, and always will be happy.

The God Who Is Happiness

So, despite his compassion and care for those who hurt now, God sees the big picture. He knows what he has planned and that ultimately all the hurt and sadness of physical existence will be wiped away (Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 21:4) and that the resulting eternal happiness will have been worth the temporary pain (Romans 8:18). Just as Jesus could experience joy in his self-sacrifice, God can and does live in happiness despite his children’s sins, faults, and problems.

God can be happy because it is his essential nature. You may not have thought about it this way, but just as the Bible shows us that God is love (1 John 4:16) and that God is life and truth (John 14:6), so God is the personification of happiness. Understanding that God is not only happy, but also that he is true happiness itself, is vital for understanding the true nature of God and for finding happiness in our own lives, as we will see.

2. Should We Be Happy?

Just as there is a common misconception of God as being somber and unjoyful, so there are widespread misunderstandings about happiness itself. Doubtless because so many people seek happiness in sinful pursuits, some older religious books equate happiness with sinfulness. Even the great Christian writer Oswald Chambers said “it is an insult to Jesus Christ to use the word happiness in connection with him” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, p. 31). Yet this is a mistaken approach based on reading into a word something that is not there. As we saw in the last chapter, the New Testament itself uses the word happiness in connection with Jesus (Hebrews 1:9; etc.), so it is not a problem if we use the word of him, or of others, in the same way.

Even though most Christians realize there is nothing wrong with happiness if it is not based on the wrong things, or wrong-doing, many still feel that the Christian life is not inherently happy and may see it as being characterized by self-denial, repentance and lack of joy. Too many assume that the problems and suffering God allows us to go through (1 Peter 5:10) preclude us being happy for at least some portions of our lives. However, once we understand that happiness is a central part of God’s nature and character, we begin to see that the life to which every believer is called is also one of happiness and joy. We are, after all, called to become like God. Paul tells us: “Follow God’s example ... as dearly loved children” (Ephesians 5:1), and the Greek of this verse reads literally, “Be imitators of God” (BLB, BSB, etc.).

Although Paul continues “and walk in the way of love” in this verse, this is an exhortation that can be taken generally – that we strive to imitate all God’s traits. But there is also a direct connection between love and happiness that we should understand. We know that God is love, but we do not always think about what this means. To say God is love does not mean that he lives in some kind of warm

fuzzy cloud of affection. True outgoing love is primarily the desire for the happiness of the person loved – so love and happiness cannot really be separated in practice. The more we love others, the more we want them to be happy.

When we fully realize this truth we better see that God’s chief purpose in our lives is our happiness – primarily through eternity, but also, as much as is possible, in this life now. We tend to think of love as the chief Christian goal – the greatest of God’s characteristics (1 Corinthians 13:13); but love is important for a reason – God wants us to love him and others as ourselves (Matthew 22:36–40) because he wants us to be happy with him, with others, and with ourselves. Put another way, God created us to desire happiness and what he desires for us is our happiness.

The Bible is full of verses showing this truth. In fact, the Scriptures contain literally thousands of references to happiness, joy, and related words. Reading even a few of them can be an education in happiness! For example, the book of Psalms (which begins with the word “happy”) contains dozens of references to the happiness God intends for those who walk with him – in this life as well as in the future. Consider the opening verses: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked ... but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:1–2 NRSV). Or think about the equally encouraging statements “Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart” (Psalm 97:11).

In these simple statements, and in many others like them throughout Psalms, Proverbs, and other books of the Bible, we find the clear truth that we are called to happiness in this life as well as in the future. The apostle Paul even told some of those with whom he worked “we work with you for your joy” (2 Corinthians 1:24).

In fact, the Bible does not simply hold happiness up to us as a goal, it exhorts us to be happy – saying, for example, “let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy” (Psalm 5:11); “Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous” (Psalm 32:11), “may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be

happy and joyful” (Psalm 68:3). And in the New Testament we read: “Rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3:1), and “Rejoice always ... for this is God's will for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16)!

So we must realize that the God who is happy, and who tells us to imitate him – to be happy, and to experience and express happiness – would not tell us to do this if it were not possible. God does not make exceptions to this call to happiness. He does not say “Be happy – unless you are persecuted, poor, in pain, or experiencing other problems,” so it must be possible for us to be happy, whatever our circumstances. We will see how this is indeed possible in the upcoming chapters of this book, but first we must ask and focus on the question “What is happiness?” If we are to be truly happy, we must first come to know what true happiness is.

3. The Nature of Happiness

What is happiness? That may seem like a strange question because everyone knows – or thinks they know – when they are happy and when they are not, so we presume we know what happiness is. But this is not actually the same as knowing what *true* happiness is, as we will see. To do that we will look at three things happiness is not, and then begin to look at what true happiness really is.

What Happiness Is Not

First, we must differentiate happiness from pleasure. Many people confuse pleasure with happiness, but we can experience pleasure and still not be happy. For example, if we ate what we knew was going to be the last meal of our lives, the meal might taste good and be pleasurable to eat, but we would probably not be happy. Happiness may be pleasurable, but pleasure itself is not happiness. For one thing, pleasure can be momentary and even some wrong behavior may bring us pleasure in the short term, but not lasting happiness. The Bible refers to this when it states “Stolen bread tastes sweet, but it turns to gravel in the mouth” (Proverbs 20:17 NLT). This is important because many people confuse pleasure with one of the components of real happiness.

Second, true lasting happiness can never be found in physical things. The old saying that “money cannot buy happiness” is certainly true – primarily because happiness sought in physical things cannot ever be satisfied. The biblical statement that “The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8) applies to every way in which physical happiness is sought. That is why the Bible tells us “the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment” (Job 20:5). It is also why Jesus told his followers “Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”

(Matthew 6:19–20 BSB) – which is as much a prescription for happiness as it is for spiritual living.

Third, we have to realize that happiness is not the absence of sorrow or grief. Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3 ESV), yet he was anointed with “the oil of gladness” (Hebrews 1:9 ESV). Jesus also suffered a death as agonizing as anyone ever has, yet he went happily, joyfully, to that death (Hebrews 12:2). This is because true happiness is not affected by problems, suffering, or the approach of death itself. We can understand these things better when we realize that happiness is really a combination of two things that are unshaken by the difficulties of this life.

The Two Sides of Happiness

True happiness involves both contentment and joy – and we cannot be happy without both. We may experience intense joy, but if it is not based on a long-lasting contentment it will be short-lived happiness. In the same way, we can be essentially content yet still not truly, fully, happy if we do not experience some occasional joy in our lives. Just as medical doctors speak of acute (short term) and chronic (long term) illness, we can say that joy is acute happiness, while contentment is chronic happiness. That is why the Bible has much to say about both contentment and joy.

Contentment is a vital part of true happiness because it is the antidote to seeking shallow, transient, happiness through physical things, as we discussed above. So the Bible tells us “be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5), and Paul wrote “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12). As Paul also told Timothy: “true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth” (1 Timothy 6:6 NLT). Contentment is not just appreciating what we have and not unduly desiring more, however – contentment is also trusting that God will provide for us (Psalm 112:7 ESV; Isaiah 41:10; etc.) and living peacefully in that contented trust.

Joy, on the other hand, is a heightened sense of happiness that may not affect us all the time (no intense emotion can be sustained

indefinitely), but which raises our everyday happiness of contentment to greater heights. Peter expressed this when he wrote “Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy”(1 Peter 1:8). Some religious people say that this spiritual joy is higher than happiness, but many of the verses we have read show this is not the case. Joy is simply a type of happiness that is intense, but not felt all the time. The Bible clearly shows that even spiritual joy can be transient (Matthew 13:20–21; etc.).

But like true contentment, true joy is not dependent on our physical situation. We see this in the beautiful words of the prophet Habakkuk: “Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines ... yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!” (Habakkuk 3:17–18 NLT). Many New Testament verses prove this can be the case. Consider just a few: “in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds” (2 Corinthians 7:4); “you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6); “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy ... welled up” (2 Corinthians 8:2); and “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2).

Putting Understanding to Work

In the next two chapters of this book we will see how even when we gain a good understanding of what happiness is, we can short-circuit it in our lives - and how not to do that. Then, in the final chapters, we will look at how understanding happiness can be put to work to help us find and keep a truly lasting happiness that is not affected by circumstances, does not fade, and grows continually stronger in our lives over time (Proverbs 4:18).

**PART TWO:
PROTECTING HAPPINESS**

4. The Happiness Destroyers – 1

We live in a world that overflows with unhappiness. Literally billions of people live with the misery of war, crime, poverty, and countless other ills that – despite our technological and scientific advances – humanity is unable to remedy. It is common to blame the world’s suffering and unhappiness on a lack of education, opportunity, or resources. But we need only to look at the everyday news to see frequent stories of rich, educated, and famous individuals seeking therapy, undergoing rehabilitation, and even committing suicide in their deep unhappiness.

Happiness Lost

It is an ironic aspect of our fallen human nature that we all want to be happy, yet we all do things that detract from our own and other people’s happiness to some degree or another. Christians make mistakes just as non-Christians do, but people who do not even attempt to do what is right bring endless frustration and unhappiness on themselves through what they do.

In the United States alone, tens of millions of people have become addicted to drugs or use them regularly, seeking to escape boredom and unhappiness. Yet the further down this path they go, the more meaningless and unhappy their lives become – all too often ending in accidental or intentional overdose.

Expectant mothers are promised more freedom and more happiness if they terminate their inconvenient pregnancies, yet countless women later regret and weep over having had abortions – finding they brought only deep unhappiness and loss. Indeed, the adverse physical and psychological effects of abortion are well documented, including startlingly high levels of depression and suicide.

Pornography has become an international mega-business offering personal happiness but delivering countless degraded or ruined relationships, personal shame, loneliness, and loss of relational joy in an endless spiral of growing dissatisfaction and perversion. In the same way, countless people's relationships have been destroyed by seeking a false promise of happiness in extra-marital affairs.

Even young children are encouraged to experiment with their sexual identities and taught that homosexuality is a harmless way to live; yet many homosexuals lead very unhappy lives as can be seen in the fact that the incidence of suicide among young gays and lesbians is fourteen times higher than for young heterosexual individuals. Similarly, between thirty and forty-five percent of transgender individuals report having attempted suicide.

These are only a few of the ways in which people reduce or destroy the happiness they might have had in their lives, and even if we do not fall into any of these situations ourselves, whatever we do that is contrary to God's intention only diminishes or destroys our happiness. Do we occasionally gossip (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20; etc.)? Do we cheat a little bit on our tax returns (Exodus 20:15; Matthew 22:21; etc.)? Do we tell occasional small untruths (Leviticus 19:11; Colossians 3:9; etc.)? Whatever we do that is not in line with God's revealed way of life so often ends up causing us unhappiness. This is what the Bible means by "Your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23), for even if we are not "caught" or punished for wrongdoing, sin is often its own punishment in the loss of happiness that inevitably follows.

Protecting Happiness

Sadly, most people do not understand that when we break the behavioral laws God has established for our good, we hurt ourselves just as surely as if we ignore the laws of gravity or any other physical law. But seen properly, the laws God established for his children are protective. Like the guard-rails erected along the sides

of mountain roads, they are not harsh or restrictive, they simply keep us from hurting ourselves and others and from making us unhappy. That is why the book of Psalms tells us: “Joyful are people of integrity, who follow the instructions of the LORD. Joyful are those who obey his laws”(Psalm 119:1–2 NLT).

Notice the context of the beautiful prophecy we have quoted earlier in this book, also found in Psalms, of how the promised Messiah would be characterized by happiness: “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy” (Psalms 45:7 and Hebrews 1:8–9). The fact that Christ hated evil and kept God’s commands (Matthew 5:17–20) is why his happiness was unspoiled. That is also why Jesus told his own disciples “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this *so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*” (John 15:10–11).

Jesus also said: “If you know these things, happy are you if you do them” (John 13:17 KJV 2000). Conversely, as the British writer Freya Stark wrote: “There can be no happiness if the things we believe in are different from the things we do.” Stopping behavior that is contrary to God’s revealed way of life is the first thing we must do to stop destroying our happiness, and the first step toward finding true contentment and joy.

5. The Happiness Destroyers – 2

We may not destroy our own happiness through wrong behavior, but there are still some ways that we can diminish or destroy happiness inadvertently. These additional threats to our happiness center around the aspect of time. We are all time travelers to some extent. Most of us spend at least part of our lives reliving the past or thinking about the future. This is not necessarily wrong – we were given memories to remember the lessons of the past, and imaginations to see and plan for the future as well as we can. But we were never intended to live in another dimension of time.

Reliving the Past

Sadly, some Christians who have undergone traumatic experiences, or who have made mistakes they find hard to forget, spend a lot of time and emotional energy dwelling on the past – re-living or analyzing events and mistakes and often suffering through the events repeatedly. This is definitely something that we need to overcome. We should always try to learn what we can from the past mistakes that we or others have made, but as Christians we are instructed to let these things be covered by the forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:14–18).

God specifically tells us “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past” (Isaiah 43:18), and “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25 ESV). The clear message is that what God chooses to forget, we should also. Anything less is not to trust in the fullness of Christ’s sacrifice – it is to proudly believe that the sins and problems of our past are too great to be covered.

We may not consciously think this, but if we do spend a lot of time re-living past events we should carefully assess our thoughts and ask God for help we may need to come back from the past: to

forget the details, remember the lessons, and let God move us forward. As the apostle Paul (who was as conscious as any of us of mistakes in his past) wrote: “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead” (Philippians 3:13).

Clinging to the Future

It is much healthier – both emotionally and spiritually – to look forward rather than backward. But Christians may also fall into a ditch on that side of the road of life. If we find ourselves frequently being concerned about the future, we must focus on the fact that trusting God regarding our future is a basic aspect of our faith (Matthew 6: 31–33). As Jesus said: “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (Matthew 6:34).

But there is another and equally debilitating aspect of living in the future. Many Christians begin to look to the future as an answer to the problems of the present. This is not wrong if it is part of our trust that God will work things out, but if we begin to focus unduly on the coming kingdom of God or “when I get to heaven” or prophecies regarding the end of the world and what might happen next, we can begin to live in the future and lose our focus on living God’s will and doing God’s work today.

Many who do this inadvertently diminish God’s calling to let his light shine in their lives. We can and should pray daily for God’s kingdom to come, but that involves the institution of God’s will now just as much as in the future. The responsibilities God gives us regarding helping others, and finding happiness in our own lives, are all in the here and now. God calls us not to live in the future to escape the now, but to live in a now that is inspired by the future.

Living in the Now

God himself is clearly a God of the present. When Moses asked God what his name was, God told him: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14) – God does not focus on what he has been or will be, his identity is

tied to now, to eternally filling the present. Certainly God is the Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8; 21:6) – the beginning and the end – but that means he was and will be the same in an eternal present. And that is what God calls us to be, also – to be who we are in the now. Trite as it may sound, there is a lot of wisdom in the old saying “Today is God’s gift, and that’s why we call it the present.”

Certainly, there may be circumstances and seasons in our life where we long for the better life of the future, and there is nothing wrong with that. But our present lives must not be forfeited by ignoring or trying to hide from the present. When we focus on living in the present moment, whatever we do – whether it be actively helping others or simply showing faith in our own trials – can be the fulfilling of God’s purpose for us. The psalmist wrote “I will sing praises to your name forever as I fulfill my vows each day” (Psalm 61:8 NLT), and this is God’s intent for us – to keep the big picture of eternity in mind, but to live in the present of each day we are given.

We should always remember that God calls us to let the past be our teacher, to let the future be our hope, but to let the present be our life. This is vitally important because it is only in the now that we can ever love God and others, and that we will ever be happy.

PART THREE:
BUILDING HAPPINESS

6. The Foundation of Happiness

Now that we have looked at what happiness is, and the things we must avoid if we are not to destroy our own contentment and joy, we can begin to look at how and where happiness can be found!

Finding the Foundation

Perhaps the greatest irony of human life is that people spend so much of their waking lives looking for happiness, but looking in all the wrong places. As we saw in Chapter 3, people confuse pleasure with happiness and seek happiness in physical things, but do not find it. Yet we are given a great clue to where true and lasting happiness can be found when we come to understand that just as he is the personification of love, truth, and every other good thing, God is the embodiment of ultimate happiness. That is why sin ultimately makes us unhappy, because sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2) – from ultimate happiness. It is also why Martin Luther wrote “Sin is pure unhappiness, forgiveness pure happiness.”

The truth is, we find happiness when we find God, and we grow in happiness as we grow closer to God. Throughout the centuries, Christian scholars and theologians have understood that this is why so few are deeply happy even when they have everything they might physically desire. Consider just a few of the words of these scholars. In the fourth century AD, Augustine of Hippo wrote in his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” In the seventeenth century the great French philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal put this fundamental truth something like this: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every [person] which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator” (paraphrased from Pascal’s *Pensées*, 113). And in the twentieth century, the great British writer C. S. Lewis explained the situation this way:

What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could ‘be like gods’ ... invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history – money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, [social] classes, empires, slavery – the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy. (*Mere Christianity*, p. 50)

Lewis hit the nail on the head with this statement. It is only when we seek God first – rather than happiness – that we end up finding happiness itself. This is why the Bible calls the Gospel “the good news of happiness” (Isaiah 52:7 ESV) and why John Wesley said, “When we first know Christ ... then it is that happiness begins; happiness real, solid, substantial.” Wesley knew first-hand that it is only the knowledge of God and a relationship with him that provides both lasting contentment and also ongoing joy – that is how we find the very foundation of all true happiness.

When the Foundation Is in Place

Finding happiness by seeking God first has tremendous implications for our lives – and our happiness. When we seek God first, we begin to see why physical things can never be the key to lasting contentment or joy. We will always want more or newer different physical things to make us happy, but our relationship with God is always and ultimately satisfying once it is in place (Psalm 73:25) – and we can always have more of God in our lives whenever we desire!

Importantly, when we find happiness in God we find that nothing can take away either our contentment or our joy. This is why the Christian can still be happy regardless of our temporary circumstances in this life – even while experiencing anxiety, difficulties, ill health, trials, loss, and persecution (Psalm 94:19; Philippians 4:11; 1 Peter 3:14; etc.); why Paul tells us we should “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4); and why there is no

contradiction between finding joy in God, and Jesus' commands to deny ourselves (Mark 8:34), and to be willing to take up a cross (Luke 9:23).

When we find true happiness, nothing can cause us to lose the contentment (what the Bible calls "peace") and joy that we receive through the indwelling of the Spirit of God (John 14:17). "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of ... peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17), and "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him ... by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Once we turn to God and receive his Spirit we receive true happiness, and just as his Spirit remains with us (John 14:16–17), so does his happiness, if we let it.

So finding the foundation and source of all true happiness is not a purely "spiritual" realization that has no relevance to our everyday lives. It is not that finding happiness in God is something that we only experience when we go to church or contemplate God. Rather, a living relationship with the God of all happiness flows over into every part of our lives.

Look at what David – a man who had such a relationship with God – wrote: "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:3–4). How much we can unpack from these few words! They show that when our happiness is based on the right foundation, we not only are promised that God will provide our needs (a fundamental aspect of contentment), but also that God will, in fact, bless us with the very desires of our hearts (the source of some of our deepest joys).

Sometimes, God fulfills our desires in a different manner to what we might expect, but the outcome is always one of happiness if we trust him. And there are things we can do that help God to grant us the fulfillment of our contentment and joy in him. In the next chapter we will look at those additional building blocks of happiness.

7. The Building Blocks of Happiness

Once we have the foundation of true happiness in place in our lives, we can begin to build on it – because there are specific physical things we can do that can enhance happiness. In fact, these are things anyone can do to increase the happiness of their lives. But just as stacking up physical building blocks without a secure foundation can be problematic, trying to enhance happiness that is not itself secure can be problematic, also. However, when our happiness is built on the foundation of a God-centered life, there are things we can all utilize to securely enlarge and strengthen the contentment and joy we experience.

Three Building Blocks to Happier Living

When we talk of “building blocks” of happiness, most people’s minds jump to things like health, wealth, and other things they feel happiness is dependent upon. But psychologists have known for a long time that there are even more basic things that are much more likely to lead to ongoing happiness and contentment. Numerous studies have confirmed what has been understood for centuries – that to be happy, or to increase our happiness, most people need three things: *something significant to do, something to look forward to, and someone to love.*

Surely, many people think, even with those three things, but without good health ... or without enough money ... or without “whatever,” you wouldn’t really be very happy. But that’s where the studies prove to be so interesting. Psychologists have verified that even without the things most people presume are necessary for happiness, we can still find that condition if we do utilize the three building blocks.

Even though the correlation between these three things and happiness has been repeatedly documented, most people still ignore them. It's as if that answer to being happy or happier is too easy to take seriously. Perhaps that is why we read in the book of Genesis, that although God is said to have placed the first man and woman in a perfect setting with the potential for perfect happiness, they lost that gift. The book of Genesis tells us the first man had the all-important relationship with God, and that God gave him the additional keys or building blocks of happiness, also.

We are told that Adam was given something significant to do: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15); something to look forward to: "In the middle of the garden [was] the tree of life" (Genesis 2:9); and someone to love: "the Lord God made a woman ... and he brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22). But although the first humans had everything necessary for happiness, they threw the gift away by turning instead to behavior that was happiness-destroying. It was then, of course, that they were expelled from the perfect setting they were in, and their perfect happiness was lost.

For the Christian this is particularly interesting because, when we look closely at the life of the "Second Adam," Jesus Christ, we see the same factors in place. Despite not having many of the things people usually equate with happiness, and in spite of undergoing great suffering, Jesus was still able to seek and find great happiness and joy (Hebrews 12:2). This was, of course, because he not only had the necessary relationship with God (John 10:30), but also he had a significant work to do (John 17:4), something to look forward to (Hebrews 12:2–3), and people to love (John 13:1).

We can find the same parallels with the happiness Paul experienced in life, despite his frequent suffering (Acts 26:2; etc.). It is true that happiness – joy – is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22), but we have only to read the gospel accounts of the life of Christ and to study the writings of the apostle Paul to see that both of them also exemplified the very things we have

called the building blocks of happiness. Consider each of these three “blocks” briefly.

Something Significant to Do: Although people can derive physical happiness from any work they might do if they find it interesting and meaningful, Christians are called to a work which is of worldwide scale and in which anyone can find a truly meaningful role (Matthew 28:18–20). Even if our involvement in the work of God is “part-time,” or in prayer alone, it is true involvement and will bring us unsought happiness to the degree we put our hearts, minds and energies into that work.

Something to Look Forward to: Psychologists know that having something to look forward to – such as a planned vacation or a family reunion – can potentially increase our happiness. But sadly, many people in this world have little to look forward to at the purely physical level, and even those who are well-off ultimately have only age and eventually death ahead of them. Followers of Jesus Christ have more to look forward to than anyone else – sharing eternal life with God and in his service (Revelation 20:6–7; 22:12–13). The significance of such a hope can hardly be measured.

Someone to Love: Our love for family members and friends certainly can be a tremendous part of our happiness even at the purely physical level, but how much more this is true for the Christian. Christ calls his disciples to follow in his footsteps in constantly loving God and not just one person, but every person (John 13:34). This factor is so important to our happiness that we will look at it in more detail in the next, final, chapter of this book.

Every Block in Place

Notice that one of the building blocks we have looked at involves our thoughts (what we look forward to), but at least two (the work we do and our relationship with others) involve our actions. This is

a vital principle in itself – that happiness is based more on what we do than what we have or even want, as we will see.

But we can confidently say that the opportunities every Christian is given in this life do not only “meet the requirements” of the building blocks of happiness – they fulfill them completely! Yet if we take away any one of these keys – if we are not truly involved in the great work to which we were called, or if we do not keep the hope of our calling firmly in mind, or if our outgoing love is limited – we will not experience deep and lasting happiness and will always feel some degree of emptiness. It is a little like having a safe with three keys – even having two out of three keys still will not open the safe. It is only as we use all three of the keys in our lives – all of the building blocks available to us – that we find happiness that does not require money or possessions, that does not even require good health, but that is true and lasting happiness nothing can take away.

8. The Capstone of Happiness

We saw in the previous chapter that once we have the foundation of happiness in place – a relationship with God – there are definite building blocks we can utilize to enhance the happiness in our daily lives. Finally, just as a physical building may have a finishing addition such as a “capstone,” spire, or pinnacle, there is a capstone principle that we can place on top of the foundation and building blocks of happiness in our lives, and we will look at that now.

That principle is based on the fact that we will never find lasting happiness by seeking it directly. We have a whole book of the Bible – the Book of Ecclesiastes – reminding us of this truth. Solomon found that satisfying our every whim certainly does not produce happiness, and that chasing happiness directly is a “chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). This is because happiness is not a commodity to be looked for and found; it comes as a result of what we do.

We have only to read widely in literature to see that this has been something that wise men and women have understood for millennia – that rather than being something we somehow find if we are lucky, happiness is something we produce by what we do. Solomon found this (Ecclesiastes 2:24–26), and consider these few modern examples: Eleanor Roosevelt wrote “Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product.” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote “Some pursue happiness – others create it.” And the current Dalai Lama has said: “Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions.” Happiness does indeed so often come through our actions, but – just as Solomon found – it does not come directly. If we consciously set out to be happy by doing something we will never find the “capstone” level of happiness that comes to us indirectly.

The Scriptures describe that kind of culminating happiness in an unexpected way. In the ancient Near Eastern world where the events described in the Bible occurred, the most common symbol of

happiness and joy was the grapevine. We see this fact in the psalmist's comment regarding "wine that gladdens human hearts" (Psalm 104:15) and in many other scriptures such as: "The vine is dried up ... Surely the people's joy is withered away" (Joel 1:12). Of course, this connection was based on the temporary physical feeling of pleasure obtained from drinking wine – so what does the symbolism of happiness connected with the vine have to do with true, deeper, and lasting happiness?

We find the answer in the words of Jesus himself when he told his disciples "I am the true vine ..." (John 15:1). Of course, these words were spoken in the direct context of our abiding in him like branches staying firmly attached to the vine (John 15:2–8), but we should not forget that the most common symbolic use of the vine in religious and philosophical teaching of that time was one of its connection with happiness and joy.

When we remember this background, the next words of Jesus suddenly become much more alive to us: "I have told you this so that my *joy* may be in you and that your *joy* may be complete" (vs. 11). When we keep the ancient biblical symbolic meaning of the vine in mind, it seems more than coincidence that Jesus points to himself as the true vine and then tells us he makes this connection so we may have true happiness or joy.

But Jesus did not just tell us these things as abstract principles – he explained his words in terms of a direct invitation to happiness that we can and should apply in our lives. Notice that the immediate context of his statement on our complete (or "capstone") happiness makes that invitation clear:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.* My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (John 15:9–12).

These words show us the way to the complete happiness Jesus had and has. His instruction is as clear as any of his words recorded in the New Testament – our happiness will be like his if our love is like his. The profound lesson we can take from this understanding is that happiness is not based on trying to achieve joy through things we get or receive – it is based on the degree to which we reverse that process and work in the other direction through outgoing love.

Love, Christ tells us, is not just the fulfilling of the law (Matthew 22:36–40), it is also the cause of ultimate happiness – in our lives and in the lives of others. In that sense, the “fruit of the vine” Christ commanded us to receive on the last evening of his life is not only symbolic of his shed blood (Matthew 26:28) – which is its primary symbolism in the context of the Lord’s Supper, of course – but also, in a no less real way, the fruit of the vine is symbolically the “fruit” of living the way Christ lived. That “fruit” is happiness, and the way to produce it is obedience and love.

This brings us full circle to what we saw at the beginning of this book and explains what we said there: that God is happiness – because God is love. The great capstone lesson on happiness that we can learn from the One who is happiness, is that the more we love the more we become like God – and the happier we become.

Conclusion: God's Ultimate Gift

Most Christians, if asked “What is the ultimate gift God wants to give us?” would probably reply “eternal life.” Living forever is certainly something that the Bible shows (from Genesis 2:9 to Revelation 22:17) is God’s desire to allow us, but hopefully this book has made it clear that eternal life is not an end in itself. Just being alive does not mean we will be happy, and God’s ultimate purpose for us is not just to be eternally alive, but to be eternally happy.

This can be our only conclusion once we realize that God is eternally happy and he wants us to be like him. As C.S. Lewis wrote, we were “made by God for eternal happiness” (*Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, p. 409), and the ultimate purpose of our being born is for “infinite happiness” (*The Great Divorce*, p. 61). But, as Lewis also so wisely noted in his writings, God does not want to give eternal life to anyone who will be eternally unhappy and make others eternally unhappy. He wrote, for example:

The point is not that God will refuse you admission to His eternal world if you have not got certain qualities of character: the point is that if people have not got at least the beginnings of those qualities inside them, then no possible external conditions could make a ‘Heaven’ for them – that is, could make them happy with the deep, strong, unshakable kind of happiness God intends for us.” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 81)

In that sense, our present life is not just practicing being alive so that we can be everlastingly alive, but an opportunity to practice being like God in every way – including, perhaps especially, to practice being happy and making others so.

Hopefully, the scriptures quoted in this book have confirmed for you that the Bible shows that happiness is the ultimate gift God has in store for us, and that it is also a gift he holds out to every one of us in the here and now. The principles we have discussed show that ultimately our happiness must be based in God, and that the contentment and joy he offers are the only true and lasting happiness we will find. That happiness can then be indirectly developed through focusing our lives, to the best degree we can, on his work, the hope he offers us, and – above all – on the love he calls us to develop with his help. If these are the things we are seeking first in our lives, we will never need to pursue happiness because, invariably, happiness will come to us. That is the true secret of finding happiness.

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