

HAPPINESS



RANDY
ALCORN

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Happiness

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WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Be happy and full of joy, because the LORD has done a wonderful thing.

JOEL 2:21, NCV

*In him the day-spring from on high has visited the world;
and happy are we, for ever happy, if that day-star arise in our hearts.*

MATTHEW HENRY

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT Christ as a teenager, visiting a church youth group. Initially, Bible stories seemed to me like the Greek mythology and comics I loved. Then I read the Gospels, and I came to believe that Jesus was real, and superheroes are his shadows. I felt a profound happiness I'd never known.

My heartfelt gladness was the result of being born again, forgiven, and indwelt by God's Spirit. This "joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12) stood in stark contrast to the emptiness I'd felt before hearing the gospel's "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10). My parents immediately noticed the change. (Mom liked it; Dad didn't.)

I never considered the things I gave up to follow Christ as sacrifices—mainly because they hadn't brought me real happiness. My worst days as a believer seemed better than my best days before knowing Christ. Jesus meant everything to me. I wasn't attempting to be happy; I simply *was* happy.

Having known Jesus for more than four decades now, I realize that my story isn't universal. Not everyone who comes to Christ experiences the dramatic increase in happiness that I did. Many do, but some see that happiness gradually fade.

Nothing is more annoying than reading a book by a naturally gleeful person who's a cheerleader for happiness. I've known a few people with perpetually sunny dispositions, but my own nature is reflective and, at times, melancholic. I've experienced seasons of depression, both before and since coming to faith in Christ—some due to my personality type and emotional makeup (and perhaps genetics), some triggered by my long-term physical illness (insulin-dependent diabetes), and some the result of adverse circumstances.

I'm no stranger to unhappiness—in this world under the curse of evil and suffering, something would be wrong if I were. I've researched the Holocaust, walked through the Killing Fields of Cambodia, written at length on persecution and the problem of evil and suffering, and have walked alongside people who have experienced profound tragedy and grief. In short, I'd be the last person to write a breezy book on happiness that ignores life's

difficulties and denies the struggles of living in a fallen world. But by God's grace, as the years have passed, I've experienced a more consistent heartfelt gladness and delight in Christ. That—not perpetual and unsustainable ecstasy—is what this book is about.

Rest assured, this book is not about pasting on a false smile in the midst of heartache. It's about discovering a reasonable, attainable, and delightful happiness in Christ that transcends difficult circumstances. This vision is realistic because it's built on God's all-encompassing sovereignty, love, goodness, grace, gladness, and redemptive purposes in our lives.

Until Christ completely cures us and this world, our happiness will be punctuated by times of great sorrow. But that doesn't mean we can't be predominantly happy in Christ. Being happy as the norm rather than the exception is not wishful thinking. It's based on solid facts: God secured our eternal happiness through a cross and an empty tomb. He is with us and in us right this moment. And he tells us to be happy in him.

"Positive thinking" says we can always be happy if we look on the bright side and don't deal with negative things (such as sin, suffering, judgment, and Hell). I don't believe that. Nor do I embrace the God-as-genie prosperity gospel preached by name-it-and-claim-it folks, which promises happiness through perpetual health, wealth, and success—if only we muster enough faith.

This health-and-wealth philosophy isn't unique to Christians. In *The Secret*, Rhonda Byrne tells about Colin, a ten-year-old boy who was dismayed by long waits for rides at Disney World. He'd seen *The Secret* movie, so he focused on the thought that tomorrow he wouldn't have to wait in line. What happened? Colin's family was chosen to be Epcot's "First Family" for the day, putting them first in every line.¹

Of course, we should be grateful when God sends us fun surprises. But it's one thing to be happy when such things occur and another to expect, demand, or lay claim to them.

Our models should be people such as Amy Carmichael (1867–1951), who brought the gospel to countless children she rescued from temple prostitution in India. She experienced a great deal of physical suffering and never had a furlough in her fifty-five years as a missionary. Yet she wrote, "There is nothing dreary and doubtful about [life]. It is meant to be continually joyful. . . . We are called to a settled happiness in the Lord whose joy is our strength."²

This book is about the surprising "settled happiness" that God makes possible despite life's difficulties. Rich and durable, this happiness is ours today because Christ is here; it's ours tomorrow because Christ will be there; and it's ours forever because he will never leave us.

What I'm writing of is *not* a superficial "don't worry, be happy" philosophy that ignores human suffering. The day hasn't yet come when God will "wipe away every tear from [his children's] eyes" (Revelation 21:4). But it *will* come. And this reality has breathtaking implications for our present happiness.

WE ALL KNOW HAPPINESS WHEN WE SEE AND EXPERIENCE IT.

Webster's Dictionary defines happiness as—wait for it . . . "the state of being happy."³ Synonyms include *pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, cheerfulness, merriment, gaiety, joy, joyfulness, joviality, delight, good spirits, lightheartedness, and well-being*.⁴

The *Dictionary of Bible Themes* gives a more biblical definition of happiness: “A state of pleasure or joy experienced both by people and by God. . . . True happiness derives from a secure and settled knowledge of God and a rejoicing in his works and covenant faithfulness.”⁵

Among Christ-followers, *happiness* was once a positive, desirable word. Only in recent times have happiness and joy been set in contrast with each other. I believe this is biblically and historically ungrounded and has significant downsides, as we’ll see later.

Are laughter, celebration, and happiness God-created gifts, or are they ambushes from Satan and our sin nature that incur God’s disapproval? Our answer determines whether our faith in God is dragged forward by duty or propelled by delight.

My best times with my wife, Nanci, and our family and friends are filled with Christ-centered interaction and heartfelt laughter. These two experiences aren’t at odds but are intertwined. The God we love is the enemy of sin *and* the creator and friend of fun and laughter.

LIKE ALL GOD’S GIFTS, HAPPINESS CAN BE TWISTED.

Many Christians in church history knew that happiness, gladness, feasting, and partying are God’s gifts. Can these good things be warped, selfish, superficial, and sinful? Of course. In a fallen world, what *can’t* be?

Believers and unbelievers alike recognize that there’s a negative form of happiness, which is all about self-gratification at others’ expense. The philosophy “do whatever makes you happy” gets considerable press, but people who live that way end up pathetic and despised.

Is there selfish and superficial happiness? Sure. There’s also selfish and superficial love, peace, loyalty, and trust. We shouldn’t throw out Christ-centered happiness with the bathwater of self-centered happiness.

Although the quest to be happy isn’t new, people today seem to be particularly thirsty for happiness. Our culture is characterized by increasing depression and anxiety, particularly among the young.⁶ Studies show that more people feel bad than good after using social media; photos and updates of everyone else having a great time leave observers feeling left out—like they don’t measure up.

Numerous Christians live in daily sadness, anger, anxiety, or loneliness, thinking these feelings are inevitable given their circumstances. They lose joy over traffic jams, a stolen credit card, or increased gas prices. They read Scripture with blinders on, missing the reasons for happiness expressed on nearly every page.

Research indicates that there is “little correlation between the circumstances of people’s lives and how happy they are.”⁷ Yet when people respond to the question “Why aren’t you happy?” they tend to focus on their current difficult circumstances. In our fallen world, troubles and challenges are constants. Happy people look beyond their circumstances to someone so big that by his grace, even great difficulties become manageable—and provide opportunities for a deeper kind of happiness.

HAPPINESS IS OFTEN ELUSIVE.

For many people, happiness comes and goes, changing with the winds of circumstance. Such happiness isn't solid or grounded. We can't count on it tomorrow, much less forever.

We say to ourselves, *I'll be happy when . . .* Yet either we don't get what we want and are unhappy, or we do get what we want and are still unhappy.

Sometimes happiness eludes us because we demand perfection in an imperfect world. It's the Goldilocks syndrome: everything must be "just right," or we're unhappy. And nothing is ever just right! So we don't enjoy the ordinary days that are a little, quite a bit, or even mostly right.

Sometimes happiness eludes us because we fail to recognize it when it comes or because we fail to contemplate and treasure it. Some people are only happy when they're unhappy. If they have nothing to complain about, they don't know what to do with themselves. But habitual unhappiness is a pitiful way to live.

Our happiness will remain unstable until we realize our status in the light of eternity. The truth is—and the Bible makes it clear—this life is temporary, but we will live endlessly somewhere, in a place that's either far better or far worse than here.

We can find lasting and settled happiness by saying yes to the God who created and redeems us and by embracing a biblical worldview. When we look at the world and our daily lives through the lens of redemption, reasons for happiness abound. And while these reasons are at times obscured, they remain permanent.

EVERYONE HAS A THEOLOGY OF HAPPINESS—BUT IS YOURS ANY GOOD?

Theologian J. I. Packer writes, "Every Christian is a theologian. Simply by speaking of God, whatever you say, you become a theologian. . . . The question then is whether you are good or bad at what you are doing."⁸

In order to be competent theologians when we speak about God and happiness, we need to go back centuries and millennia rather than months or decades. My many quotations from centuries past may appear to make this book less relevant, but they actually make it far *more* relevant. That's because they've stood the test of time. They aren't trending on Twitter today, only to disappear into tomorrow's graveyard of triviality.

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) spoke of "chronological snobbery," the flawed belief that newer ideas are inherently better. The people of God who went before us lived the Christian life in difficult times and places. What Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Bunyan, John Wesley, and Charles Spurgeon said about happiness cries out for attention. Let the Puritans serve as a wake-up call as well—they often experienced and spoke of profound happiness in seemingly unbearable circumstances. Like skilled blacksmiths, they forged happiness on Scripture's anvil, under the severe hammer of life . . . all the while smiling at the bountiful beauties of God's creation and providence.

My hope is that this book will bring balance to your worldview and your walk with Christ by correcting—through Scripture and Christian history—widespread and deep-seated misconceptions about happiness.

Why such a big book? Because what God's Word says about happiness, and what God's people have said about it, is not a puddle, a pond, or even a lake. It is an ocean.

I invite you to join a long line of God-worshippers in celebrating the Creator's happiness, his design for his image bearers to enter into his happiness, and his willingness to take extreme measures to purchase our happiness.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK'S DIRECTION.

Many people spend their lives waiting to be happy. *If only* they can enter the perfect relationship, graduate, move, lose weight, find a better job, buy that new car, get married, have children, win the lottery, have grandchildren, or retire—*then* they'll be happy.

Anyone who waits for happiness will never be happy. Happiness escapes us until we understand why we should be happy, change our perspective, and develop habits of happiness. In researching this book, I've experienced a deeper, more biblical, more Christ-centered happiness than I've ever known. I hope reading it will make you as happy as writing it has made me.

Knowing where we're headed will help you make sense of this journey.

Part 1 examines our longing and search for happiness.

We'll address God's desire for our happiness and how he has wired us to seek happiness—a wiring that remained after Adam and Eve's fall. We'll explore sin's land mines and discover happiness at its only true source.

We'll see that statements such as "God isn't concerned about our happiness, only our holiness" and "God calls us to joy, not happiness" are misguided and unbiblical.

We'll look at the modern evangelical Christian skepticism concerning happiness and see how it skews our worldview and undermines our effectiveness in sharing the gospel.

Part 2 explores the happiness of the triune God.

Though I was happy as a young Christian, there's a paradigm-shifting doctrine I was never taught in church, Bible college, or seminary: the happiness of God himself. I've read many Christian books on joy that make no mention of God's joy. It's something I now believe should be at the heart of a Christian worldview.

This is why I give considerable attention to the biblical teaching that God is happy. Only when we understand this can we believe that God wants *us* to be happy. Scripture makes this statement about imitating Jesus: "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6). If Jesus walked around mostly miserable, we should be miserable too. If he was happy, we should be happy. (If we're to be Christlike, we'd better learn what Christ is like!)

If God is happy, then this world's unhappiness is a deviation from God and his original design. Scripture reveals that even our present struggles, which trigger unhappiness, are part of his larger plan to bring greater and everlasting happiness. Even here and now, God's children have every reason to be the world's happiest people.

Part 3 surveys the numerous biblical passages that speak of happiness, joy, and gladness.

We'll observe the astounding scope and frequency of the Hebrew and Greek words for happiness, which demonstrate how the Bible repeatedly shows that our Creator wants us happy. Here are just a few:

- May all those who seek you be happy and rejoice in you! (Psalm 40:16, NET)
- You are the LORD's people! So celebrate and praise the only God. (Psalm 97:12, CEV)
- Shout triumphantly to the LORD, all the earth! Be happy! Rejoice out loud! (Psalm 98:4, CEB)
- You also should be happy and full of joy with me. (Philippians 2:18, NCV)
- Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NKJV)

We'll discover that some of the Hebrew and Greek words used to convey the meaning of *happy* or *happiness* aren't translated as such in most English Bible versions. We'll see how words translated *joy*, *gladness*, and *delight* are synonyms of *happiness*.

Part 4 addresses ways to live a Christ-centered life of happiness.

When we seek holiness at the expense of happiness or happiness at the expense of holiness, we lose both the joy of being holy and the happiness birthed by obedience. God commands holiness, knowing that when we follow his plan, we'll be happy. He also commands happiness, which makes obeying him not only duty, but also pleasure.

Many Christians live as if their faith has drained their happiness! But the same Jesus who calls for sacrifice, promising that we'll share in his suffering, also tells us to lay our burdens at his feet. We're to take up our crosses daily, yet he promises that his burden is light. Life isn't easy, but believers have the benefit of walking the hard roads side by side with a loving Father, a Son who's our friend, and a comforting Holy Spirit.

Thomas Watson (1620–1686), a Puritan preacher and author, said, "He has no design upon us, but to make us happy. . . . Who should be cheerful, if not the people of God?"⁹ Did you catch that? A Puritan is saying that God's design is to make us happy. What did Watson know that we don't?

British preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) said, "Those who are 'beloved of the Lord' must be the most happy and joyful people to be found anywhere upon the face of the earth."¹⁰ Our happiness makes the gospel contagiously appealing; our unhappiness makes it alarmingly unattractive. But is the church today known for its happiness or unhappiness?

We'll discover how we as individuals and the church as a whole can be known for being genuinely happy. When we search for happiness apart from Christ, we find loneliness, confusion, and misery. When we focus on God and others, we find untold happiness.

I hope that as you read you'll ask God to speak to you and you'll contemplate the Scripture at the book's core. May you find greater happiness in God than you've ever known. And may you experience more delight in sharing with others the startlingly "good news of great joy": eternal happiness in Jesus . . . starting right now.

———— PART 1 ————

Our Compelling Quest for Happiness



WHY DO WE LONG FOR HAPPINESS?

The people the LORD has freed will return and enter Jerusalem with joy. Their happiness will last forever. They will have joy and gladness, and all sadness and sorrow will be gone far away.

ISAIAH 51:11, NCV

The most essential and active desire in human nature is to happiness. . . . There is nothing more uniform and inviolable than the natural inclination to happiness.

WILLIAM BATES



THE *SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION* contains a poignant scene in which a prisoner, Andy, locks himself into a restricted area and plays a record featuring opera singers. Beautiful music pours through the public address system while prisoners and guards stare upward, transfixed.

Another prisoner, Red, played by Morgan Freeman, narrates:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. . . . I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.¹

The music liberated those prisoners, stirring feelings of a better reality and instilling hope that true beauty exists. We, too, though we live in a fallen world, dare to hope for a transcendent happiness that's out there . . . somewhere.

The feverish pursuit of happiness in our culture might lead us to believe it's a passing fad, the worldview equivalent of bell-bottoms or Beanie Babies. Not so. The desire for happiness isn't, as many misrepresent it, the child of modern self-obsession. The thirst for happiness is deeply embedded both in God's Word and in every human culture.

Timothy Keller says, “While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”²

MY ACHE FOR SOMETHING GREATER BEGAN IN CHILDHOOD.

There’s a cartoon that makes a profound statement about happiness. The first panel shows happy schoolchildren entering a street-level subway station—laughing, playing, tossing their hats in the air. The next panel shows middle-aged adults emerging from the station looking like zombies—dull, joyless, unenthusiastic.

A study indicates that children laugh an average of four hundred times daily, adults only fifteen.³ So what happens between childhood and maturity that damages our capacity for happiness?

I have some fond memories of my childhood and the idealistic dreams of my early life. But by the time I was a teenager, I was disillusioned and empty—though most who knew me wouldn’t have guessed.

I grew up knowing almost nothing of Jesus, God, the gospel, the Bible, and the church. My father owned taverns and operated Alcorn Amusements, which supplied and serviced game machines for taverns. Before computers and video games, I grew up in a home filled with foosball and pool tables, pinball and bowling machines. I even had two jukeboxes in my bedroom. (My house was a popular place for my friends to hang out!) These amusement machines were designed to make people happy . . . yet *nobody in my family was happy*.

This was a second marriage for both my parents. Every time Dad came home drunk and he and Mom yelled at each other, I lay in bed wondering whether this fight would end in divorce.

In junior high I got good grades, won awards, played quarterback, and was named team captain and student body president, but I wasn’t happy. I had brief tastes of happiness, but I spent far more time seeking happiness and longing for it than experiencing it. I bought comic books by the hundreds, subscribed to fantasy and science fiction magazines, and spent nights gazing through my telescope, pondering the universe.

The night sky filled me with awe—and a small taste of happiness. I yearned for something bigger than myself. (Since I knew nothing of God, aliens were the primary candidates.) One unforgettable night, I gazed at the great galaxy of Andromeda, 2.5 million light-years away, with its trillion stars. I longed to explore it someday, to lose myself in its immensity.

But my wonder was trumped by an unbearable sense of loneliness and separation. I wept because I felt so incredibly small. Unknown to me, God was using the marvels of his universe to draw me to himself. Through God’s creation, I was seeing “his invisible attributes . . . his eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20).

That gnawing emptiness grew until eventually I set the telescope aside. If the universe had meaning—if I had meaning—I had no clue what it was.

Sometimes I’d sit on my bed for hours, staring into the jukebox, immersed in the sounds

of the '60s. I felt a sense of urgency listening to John Lennon sing "Help!" As I sang the words, "I need somebody," I didn't realize that "somebody" was Jesus.

I later learned that at the height of his success, Lennon wrote a personal letter to an evangelist. After quoting a line from a Beatles song, "Money can't buy me love," he said, "It's true. The point is this, I want happiness. I don't want to keep on with drugs. . . . Explain to me what Christianity can do for me. Is it phoney? Can He love me? I want out of hell."⁴

Lennon knew he didn't have what philosophers and theologians have long claimed we all want—happiness.

As for me, I looked for ways to fill that hungry void, but unhappiness and loneliness prevailed. I found distraction, but never fulfillment.

When I first read the Bible, it was new, intriguing, and utterly disorienting. I opened it and discovered these words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Then I read the greatest understatement ever: "He made the stars also" (Genesis 1:16, KJV). Countless stars in a universe one hundred billion light-years across are a mere add-on: "also."

I realized that this book was about a person who made the universe, including Andromeda and Earth—and me.

Because I had no reference points when I read the Bible, it wasn't just Leviticus that confused me. But when I reached the Gospels, something changed. I was fascinated by Jesus. Everything about him had the ring of truth, and soon I came to believe he was real. Then, by a miracle of grace, he transformed me.

This life change was characterized by many factors, but the single most noticeable difference was my newfound happiness. My father, enraged that I'd turned to a belief he disdained, predicted I would "outgrow" my conversion. I'm grateful that forty-five years later, I haven't. (I'm also grateful that at age eighty-five, my dad trusted Christ.) Like most of us, I've experienced suffering and heartaches. Still, I regularly find happiness in the one who reached out to me with his grace decades ago—and continues to do so every day.

Though I live in a world that sells false happiness at newsstands, websites, and big-box stores, I thank God for authentic happiness in Jesus.

SEEKING HAPPINESS IS AS NATURAL AS BREATHING.

Augustine, considered by many the most influential theologian in church history, wrote 1,600 years ago, "Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy."⁵

In the fourth century AD, Augustine asked, "For who wishes anything for any other reason than that he may become happy?"⁶ He also said, "There is no man who does not desire this, and each one desires it with such earnestness that he prefers it to all other things; whoever, in fact, desires other things, desires them for this end alone."⁷

(I will quote many sources here to demonstrate that this view of happiness isn't a narrowly held belief but a consensus throughout church history.)

Nearly 1,300 years after Augustine, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception."⁸

Pascal's contemporary, English Puritan Thomas Manton (1620–1677), said, “It is as natural for the reasonable creature to desire to be happy, as it is for the fire to burn.” Manton followed with the bad news: “But we do not make a right choice of the means that may bring us to that happiness that we desire.” He went on to say that human beings “choose means quite contrary to happiness.”⁹

English theologian Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) echoed this sentiment: “Happiness being by all men desirable, the desire of it is naturally engrafted in every man; and is the centre of all the searchings of his heart and turnings of his life.”¹⁰

In 1639, Puritan Robert Crofts wrote, “All men naturally desire happiness. All their plots, purposes, and endeavors aim at this end only.”¹¹

Scottish churchman Thomas Boston (1676–1732) said, “Consider what man is. He is a creature that desires happiness, and cannot but desire it. The desire of happiness is woven into his nature, and cannot be eradicated. It is as natural for him to desire it as it is to breathe.”¹²

Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) said, “There is no man upon the earth who isn't earnestly seeking after happiness, and it appears abundantly by the variety of ways they so vigorously seek it; they will twist and turn every way, ply all instruments, to make themselves happy men.”¹³

Evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770) said, “Is it the end of religion to make men happy, and is it not every one's privilege to be as happy as he can?”¹⁴ Whitefield asked an audience, “Does [Jesus] want your heart only for the same end as the devil does, to make you miserable? No, he only wants you to believe on him, that you might be saved. This, this, is all the dear Savior desires, to make you happy, that you may leave your sins, to sit down eternally with him.”¹⁵

None of these men of God had an argument against happiness-seeking. Their message was simply that true happiness could be found only in Christ.

If we don't understand what these figures from church history knew, we'll imagine that we have a choice whether or not we want to pursue happiness. In fact, *we don't*. Seeking happiness is a given—a universal constant. It's present in every person of every age, era, and circumstance. So it's entirely unrealistic and counterproductive for Christians to tell people they shouldn't want to be happy. They can't help it!

Any pastor who tries to motivate people to stop seeking happiness, any parent who tries to make his or her child repent of being motivated by happiness, is fighting a losing battle. Neither will succeed, and both will do damage by distancing the gospel from the happiness everyone craves.

WHAT IF WE WANT TO BE HAPPY NOT BECAUSE WE'RE SINNERS BUT BECAUSE WE'RE HUMANS?

Based on the books I've read, the sermons I've heard, and the conversations I've had, I'm convinced that many Christians believe our desire for happiness was birthed in human-kind's fall.

But what if our desire for happiness comes from God? What if he wired his image

bearers for happiness before sin entered the world? How might this perspective change our approach to life, parenting, church, ministry, business, sports, and entertainment?

Augustine asked rhetorically, “Is not a happy life the thing that all desire, and is there any one who altogether desires it not?” Then he added a critical question: “But where did they acquire the knowledge of it, that they so desire it? Where have they seen it, that they so love it?”¹⁶

Not only has God written his law on our hearts (see Romans 2:15); he has written a love of happiness on them.

Blaise Pascal, who said that “all men seek happiness,” wrote these words in his collection of thoughts on theology:

What else does this longing and helplessness proclaim, but that there was once in each person a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? We try to fill this in vain with everything around us, seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are there. Yet none can change things, because this infinite abyss can only be filled with something that is infinite and unchanging—in other words, by God himself. God alone is our true good.¹⁷

In other words, the Fall didn’t generate the human longing for happiness—it derailed and misdirected it.

Scripture portrays our connection to the sin of Adam in a way that transcends time—as if we were there in Eden with him (see Romans 5:12–21). Similarly, I believe we inherited from our Eden-dwelling ancestors a sense of their pre-Fall happiness. This explains why our hearts refuse to settle for sin and suffering and we long for something better.

Were we merely the product of natural selection and survival of the fittest, we’d have no grounds for believing any ancient happiness existed. But even those who have never been taught about the Fall and the Curse intuitively know that something is seriously wrong.

Why else would we long for happiness and sense what a utopian society should look like even if we’ve never seen one? We are nostalgic for an Eden we’ve only seen hints of.

Medieval scholar Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) lamented humanity’s fall and the loss of the happiness that comes from knowing God: “O wretched lot of man, when he hath lost that for which he was made! . . . He has lost the blessedness [happiness] for which he was made, and has found the misery for which he was not made.”¹⁸

Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) wrote, “Happiness is what all mankind want to obtain—the desire for it is deeply planted in the human heart.”¹⁹

If this desire is “deeply planted” in our hearts, who planted it? Our answer to that question will dramatically affect the way we see the world. Did Adam and Eve want to be happy before they sinned? Did they enjoy the food God provided because it tasted sweet? Did they sit in the sun because it felt warm and jump into the water because it felt refreshing? If we believe God is happy (a topic we’ll explore in part 2), then wouldn’t he make us with the desire and capacity to be happy?

Christ-followers say things like, “God wants you blessed, not happy”;²⁰ “God doesn’t want you to be happy. God wants you to be holy”;²¹ and “God doesn’t want you to be happy, he wants you to be strong.”²² But does the message that God doesn’t want us to be happy promote the Good News or obscure it?

When we separate God from happiness and from our longing for happiness, we undermine the Christian worldview. We might as well say, “Stop breathing and eating; instead, worship God.” People must breathe and eat and desire happiness—and they can worship God as they do so!

PUTTING GOD ON THE SIDE OF HOLINESS AND SATAN ON THE SIDE OF HAPPINESS IS A DANGEROUS MANEUVER.

The devil has mastered this strategy. His lie from the beginning was that God doesn’t care about our good. The truth is, God wants us to seek real happiness in him, while Satan wants us to seek imitation holiness stemming from our self-congratulatory pride. The Pharisees had a passionate desire to be holy on their own terms. Christ’s response? “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44).

Satan hates God, he hates us, and he hates happiness as much as he hates holiness—God’s and ours. He isn’t happy and has no happiness to give. He dispenses rat poison in colorful, happy-looking wrappers. The devil has no power to implant in us a desire for happiness. Satan is not about happiness; he is about sin and misery, which come from seeking happiness where it can’t be found. God is the one who planted our desire for happiness.

Baptist pastor and professor John Broadus (1827–1895) put it this way:

The minister may lawfully appeal to the desire for happiness and its negative counterpart, the dread of unhappiness. Those philosophers who insist that we ought always to do right simply and only because it is right are not philosophers at all, for they are either grossly ignorant of human nature or else indulging in mere fanciful speculations.²³

The modern evangelical antipathy to happiness backfires when it portrays Christianity as being against what people long for most. (True, we chronically seek happiness in sin, but the core problem isn’t seeking happiness but choosing sin instead of God.)

FEW FIND THE LASTING HAPPINESS THEY CRAVE.

Anselm wrote what seems tragically obvious: “Not everyone who has the will for happiness has happiness.”²⁴ Adam and Eve fell away from God and happiness because of their disobedience. However, they never lost their desire to be happy.

Why are many people so unhappy? Pascal suggested, “Who is unhappy at not being a king, except a deposed king?”²⁵

Because we were made for greatness, the world’s superficiality is unsatisfying. We sense that unhappiness is abnormal, and we ache for someone, somehow, to bring us lasting happiness. That someone is Jesus, and that somehow is his redemptive work.

A. W. Tozer (1897–1963) said, “Man is bored, because he is too big to be happy with that which sin is giving him.”²⁶

As Adam and Eve’s descendants, we inherited their separation from God, and therefore from happiness. Ages later, we retain a profound awareness that we were once happy—and that we should be happy.

This compelling desire for genuine happiness, while at times painful, is God’s grace to us. Longing for the happiness humankind once knew, we can be drawn toward true happiness in Christ, which is offered us in the gospel.

God used my persistent desire for happiness to prepare me for the gospel message. The “good news of great joy” in Christ was exactly the cool water my thirsty young soul craved.

The gospel is good news only to those who know they need it. Had I been happy without Jesus, I never would have turned to him.