

happiness

andrew wilson



what it is,
where to find it,
and how to make
it last forever

“There’s so much to love about this book! It sparkles with clarity, biblical depth, and insight born not only from study but from life experience. With sharp prose and memorable analogies, Andrew Wilson helps us see more clearly what our restless hearts are really searching for—and where true happiness is found.”

Trevin Wax, Vice President of Resources and Marketing, North American Mission Board; Visiting Professor, Cedarville University; author, *Rethink Your Self*, *The Gospel Way Catechism*; and *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*

“As I read *Happiness*, I was convicted of my own slowness to pursue joy and happiness in God. But it was a delightful conviction, like being reminded of some good news that I had forgotten. Wilson’s book is pastoral and accessible yet deeply researched and theological. Without sugarcoating the difficulties of life, Wilson reminds us of the glorious joys that are ours in Christ and the goodness of enjoying God’s creation rightly. I highly recommend it for all of us but especially for those of us who are skeptical of books on happiness.”

Alan Noble, Professor of English, Oklahoma Baptist University; author, *On Getting Out of Bed*

“In an age that treats happiness as both a right and a reward, Christians can uncritically absorb the world’s assumptions about what it means to be happy. Andrew Wilson’s *Happiness* is, therefore, an important book for our time. What he offers is not therapeutic uplift but a robust, Scripture-saturated theology of the *what*, *where*, and *how* of happiness. Grounding his discussion in the character and purposes of God—the happiest being in existence—Wilson helps us see that true happiness is neither selfish nor shallow but deeply Christ-shaped. This book will reshape how you think about joy, discipleship, and the God who wants you to be happy.”

Danielle Treweek, Theological Research Officer, Sydney Anglican Diocese; author, *Single Ever After*

“In an age of anxiety and amidst an epidemic of loneliness, Andrew Wilson invites us to share God’s happiness. This elegant and easy-to-read book helps us grasp that God is most happy with us when we find happiness in him.”

Rev. Dr. Michael F. Bird, Deputy Principal, Ridley College

"I only endorse books if there is someone in my life for whom I'd want to buy it. I already want to buy this delightful volume for at least five people!"

Rebecca McLaughlin, author, *Confronting Christianity*

"I've felt bad for wanting to feel happy. Perhaps it's because, like many Christians, I've imbibed messages that characterized the Christian life as a grim march rather than a joyful journey. The first gift of this book was to disabuse me of such notions and offer assurance that the one who created me designed me to long for joy. The second gift? It provided a path to experience that happiness. By combining teachings from the Scripture, theology, and psychology, Wilson has crafted a stimulating and practical resource on the subject. Readers will close the last page inspired and equipped to respond to Jesus's invitation: "Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:21 NIV).

Drew Dyck, author, *Yawning at Tigers* and *Your Future Self Will Thank You*

"Andrew Wilson is an important voice for our time. In a cultural moment marked by distraction, disappointment, and quiet disillusionment with the promises of success and self-fulfillment, this book speaks to something everyone is longing for. With theological depth, pastoral warmth, and intellectual clarity, Andrew helps us see that true happiness is not shallow sentiment but is rooted in the very life of God. This is a timely and compelling vision of joy that lasts, and it's one our restless age desperately needs."

Jeremy Treat, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality LA, Los Angeles, California; Professor of Theology, Biola University; author, *The Crucified King*, *Seek First*; and *The Atonement*

Happiness

Happiness

*What It Is, Where to Find It, and
How to Make It Last Forever*

Andrew Wilson

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Happiness: What It Is, Where to Find It, and How to Make It Last Forever

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*For Steve and Deb Tibbert,
with thanks for partnership in the gospel,
a home away from home,
and making me feel bigger and smaller at the same time*

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Preface

EVERYONE WANTS TO BE HAPPY. They may not always agree on what happiness is, and they certainly do not always agree on how to experience it. But whatever it is, they want it. So do you. “All men seek happiness,” wrote Blaise Pascal. “This is without exception. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal. . . . This is the end of every act of every man, including those who go and hang themselves.”¹

So it is not surprising that an awful lot of books have been written on the subject. There are books on happy habits, brains, diets, and chemicals; books on happy families, philosophies, and religions; books on the science of happiness, the sociology of happiness, the theology of happiness, and the history of happiness; books on how you can be happy if you really want to be and books on how you will actually be happier if you *stop* trying to be. In such a flooded landscape of ideas, it is probably worth explaining the approach taken in this book before we get started.

1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Penguin, 1995), 45.

Happiness is an attempt to bring together three types of writing on happiness. All three have influenced me in important ways, but they are almost always kept separate from one another. The first type is biblical and pastoral, in which the case is made from Scripture that God is happy and wants us to find our highest joy in him. The second type is theological and philosophical; it mounts an argument for considering happiness as the result of living a virtuous, loving, and good life, in dialogue with Christian theologians and ancient and modern philosophers. The third type is psychological and sociological, full of studies, charts, and all kinds of practical recommendations on how to live a happier life. The second and especially the third types often have bright yellow covers. The first type never does.²

Some writers combine two of these three genres. C. S. Lewis, who wrote about joy in most of his books, bridges the first and the second. Jonathan Haidt is an influential example of someone who blends the second and the third.³ But in *Happiness*, I seek to integrate all three. I am convinced we can learn from pastors, theologians, philosophers, and psychologists on the subject of happiness—and that some of our greatest thinkers, from Paul to Augustine to Pascal to Lewis, were comfortable wearing any of these various hats if the situation required it. I have also found it both intriguing and encouraging to discover how often the best thinkers in each category are saying very similar things.

2 Although admittedly there is a yellowish tinge to the sunlight on the cover of Sam Storms, *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Enjoying God* (NavPress, 2000).

3 Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Arrow, 2007).

Structurally, this book is organized around six questions: why, what, who, when, where, and how. I start by considering why enjoyment is possible, rooted in what Scripture says about the character and purposes of God (chap. 1). Then I explore what happiness actually is and how the wide range of words we use for it overlap and differ from one another (chap. 2), before looking at who we are and how our bodies, souls, natures, minds, emotions, and brains collaborate—or not—in our desire to rejoice (chap. 3). In the next two chapters we think about the when and the where of enjoyment, drawing from Ecclesiastes and the Psalms in particular to reflect on how happiness relates first to time (chap. 4) and then to space (chap. 5). We finish with the very practical question that most people are asking (chap. 6): How can we actually rejoice in the Lord, live the good life, and experience joy?

A couple of disclaimers before we start. First, I am a pastor. My specialist training is in the study of the New Testament, not positive psychology or mental health; and although I have done my best to learn about these fields in the areas where they overlap with the subject of this book, I would be the first to admit that I am not an expert on them. Readers looking for more details (and credentials!) can follow the footnotes in the relevant sections, especially in chapters 3 and 6.

Second, I am also by nature quite a cheerful person. That might sound like a strange disclaimer, especially if you have been raised to believe you should never trust a skinny chef. But as we will see, our God-given dispositions play a major role in the extent to which we experience joy in this life—although not (thankfully!) in eternity—and those of us who are Eeyores by nature can often find it annoying to be told to cheer up by Tiggers, especially

PREFACE

if they do not realize how much their positivity results from their temperament. I hope that a mixture of pastoral experience, personal trials, and a bit of self-awareness will prevent me from falling into that trap, but I thought it was better to come clean about it nonetheless.

With all that said, here is a book on what happiness is, where to find it, and how to make it last forever. Enjoy.

Pleasures Forever

Why Happiness Is Possible

Come and share your master's happiness!

MATTHEW 25:21 (NIV)

GOD WANTS YOU to be happy.

By that I do not mean that he wants you to cheer up, look on the bright side, or turn that frown upside down. Nor do I mean that your present life should (or will) involve a permanent state of pleasant feeling, in which your mood never changes and nothing upsetting ever happens. I mean something much richer and more satisfying: that the God who created the world wants you to experience deep, uninhibited, raucous, and eternal joy—and if you want that too, then ultimately you will.

You may already be convinced of that. Perhaps you were raised in a tradition in which delighting in God was pursued and

celebrated, both in the church and in ordinary life. Perhaps you were persuaded by reading Scripture, with all its talk of “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” in God’s presence (Ps. 16:11) and “rejoic[ing] with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). Perhaps, like me, you grew up with a father who would bounce into the kitchen quoting the first half of Philippians 4:4—“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, . . .”—and who would not let his teenagers return to their cereal until they had completed the quotation: “Rejoice!”

Maybe you were not raised in a Christian tradition at all, but your experience of the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the gift of his Spirit gave you such boundless delight that it has never occurred to you that a Christian could settle for anything less. Perhaps you read a book that made a theological case for seeking your happiness in God above all things and found it compelling. Or maybe you just always had an intuitive sense that the Creator of vineyards and sunsets must want his creatures to be happy in the end, in spite of all the pains and sorrows we are afflicted with now, and that ultimately “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”¹ If so, wonderful.

That may not be your reality, though. You might describe your experience of fatherhood and family or of church community using very different language: dour, somber, stern, po-faced. You may have known a series of brooding, disapproving church leaders. Your vision of God might be fiercer, harsher, or crosser than the Father described by Jesus and closer to the scowling

1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Grace Warrack, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 27.55, <https://ccel.org/>.

judge of some Christian art, perennially haunted by the fear that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time. Maybe you were taught early on that Jesus came to make people holy rather than happy or that happiness was a trivial and flippant experience, in contrast to joy, which is meaningful, deep, and serious.

Or maybe you were taught the opposite, surrounded by people who were forever chasing middle-class #Blessings like financial security and relational fulfillment, and you rightly reacted against it as a distortion of biblical Christianity. Maybe you are acutely aware of all the sadness in the world, which means that even when you do feel happy, you feel a background rumble of guilt about it. Maybe you used to believe that God wanted you to be happy, but you gradually lost that hope through the experience of severe depression, tragic life events, exposure to the sufferings of others, or all three. Perhaps none of these things are true, but you still find it hard to believe that God wants everlasting happiness for *you* (as opposed to other, more saintly people); you don't take sin seriously enough as it is. Or perhaps you are nervous of pursuing happiness because you have seen its shadow side: people who follow their hearts into terrible and destructive decisions on the basis of the assumption that, if God wants them to be happy, then *anything* that makes them happy—money, sex, power, drugs, anything—must be of God.

So let's imagine for a moment that you are closer to the second of these sketches than the first one. And let's imagine that you are open to being convinced or are even hopeful that God wants you to be happy. How might I go about persuading you?

I would start with one of the most delightfully jarring truths there is: God is the happiest being in existence.

Words and Pictures

In an art museum in the beautiful Tuscan city of Siena hangs a five-hundred-year-old oil painting that captures nearly everything that is wrong with our view of God.

It was painted in 1513 by the Renaissance artist Domenico Beccafumi as an altarpiece for a hospital chapel and entitled the *Trinity Triptych*.² It consists of three panels. The right- and left-hand panels show John the Baptist and John the Evangelist flanked by the martyred twins Cosmas and Damian. In the center is a picture of the Trinity at the crucifixion (see fig. 1) with the Father holding the cross on which Christ is dying and the Holy Spirit perched as a dove on top of it. The grey storm clouds and alarming cherub-like creatures that swirl around the cross give the whole scene an air of menace.

But the scariest feature of the painting is its portrayal of the Trinity. (When God prohibited people from making images of gods in the second commandment, you wonder if this is one of the things he had in mind.) Jesus is dead: head bowed, hands nailed, eyes closed. The Spirit is so small, static, and impersonal that you might initially not even notice him; I have shown this to people who have mistaken the Spirit for something entangled in the Father's beard. And the Father is frankly terrifying, with an austere countenance and fierce scowl that remind you of Christopher Lee as Saruman in the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. If this visual depiction is anything close to the truth about God, then the idea of approaching him to ask for mercy, let alone spending eternity in his presence, is the stuff of nightmares.

2 I am grateful to my friend Adrian Birks for introducing me to this painting and its theological implications.

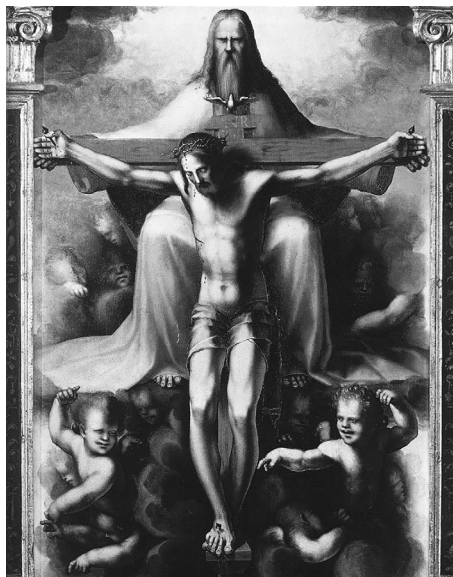


Figure 1 Detail of Domenico Beccafumi, *Trinity Triptych*, 1513, oil on panel, 59.8 x 89.7 in., Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena, Italy. Photo courtesy of Web Gallery of Art (Wikimedia Commons, public domain).

Fortunately, it is not. In reality Jesus is alive: head raised, eyes open, hands raised in triumph and prayer. The Spirit is powerful, joyful, and life giving, just as divine and personal as the Father and the Son and blowing wherever he wills as he fills the world with love and peace. The Father is smiling and singing, not scowling and staring, and his arms are outstretched because he is embracing the world with forgiveness in Christ and welcoming us to himself. Nobody in the universe is happier than the triune God.

The best way of making this case is not to replace this painting with a different one (although Andrei Rublev's *The Trinity* gives

a far warmer vision of the divine life). Rather, it is to open the Scriptures and see how God is described. For anyone whose image of God has been distorted by pictures of God, hearing the words of God can be a deeply refreshing experience.

Consider the way Jesus talks about God in his parables and elsewhere. Once there was a king who threw a wedding banquet and wouldn't let it start until all the places had been filled (Luke 14:12–24). Once there was a man who found his sheep that had wandered off; he went home rejoicing and invited everyone in the village to rejoice along with him (Luke 15:3–7). Once there was a woman who found a lost coin and invited everyone to rejoice with her as well (Luke 15:8–10). Once there was a vineyard owner who was so generous to his laziest staff that it drove everybody else crazy (Matt. 20:1–16). Once there was a father whose son returned from a far-off country; and he celebrated with a hug, a kiss, new clothes, a feast, music, dancing, and an insistence that everybody had to celebrate and be glad (Luke 15:11–32). Once there was a master who gave lots of money to his servants, and when they used it well, he invited them to “come and share your master's happiness!” (Matt. 25:21, 23 NIV). (Things did not go so well, however, for the people who turned down the wedding invitation because they had more important things to do, or for those who chose to sit outside the party sulking, or for the servant who was afraid of his master because he was a “hard man.” Domenico Beccafumi, take note.) A surprising number of the parables involve a party or feast of some kind, and the character who represents God is always the party host.

Jesus spent a lot of time at parties too. Indeed, this is one of the most historically certain things we know about him;

you can be absolutely sure that the early church did not invent the allegation that Jesus was “a glutton and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34). Clearly the charges of drunkenness and gluttony were untrue. But you only get a reputation like that if you spend a lot of time with people who are eating and drinking too much. Then there is the fact that Jesus starts his public ministry by miraculously providing wine—the great symbol of joy in the Jewish prophets—at an under-catered wedding (John 2:1–11); and he concludes his ministry by serving wine to his anxious disciples, while promising that the next time he drinks, it will be with them in his Father’s kingdom (Matt. 26:27–29). On the night that he is betrayed, he keeps returning to the subject of joy in his teaching, discussion, and even prayer (John 15:11; 16:19–24; 17:13).

Many of us struggle with this idea of divine happiness because we think joy is incompatible with seriousness. We associate laughter with frivolity; we do not naturally think of grinning zealots or jolly judges. But that association does not come from Jesus. Both Old and New Testaments present God simultaneously as abounding with joy and ruling with justice. The separation of the two has more in common with the stern words of the Ayatollah Khomeini: “There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious.”³ Scripture paints a very different picture, nicely summarized by C. S. Lewis’s remark that “joy is the serious business of heaven.”⁴

3 Broadcast by Radio Iran, 20 August 1979, as quoted in Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (Hutchinson, 1985), 259.

4 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1964), 93.

On several occasions, the Gospels even give us a glimpse into the rejoicing that happens within the Trinity. The Father expresses his pleasure in the Son as the Spirit descends on him (Matt. 3:16–17). The Son promises that his disciples will have irrepressible, inextinguishable joy when the Spirit comes, and he prays to the Father that they will have the full measure of his joy within them (John 16:12–24; 17:13). The Son is full of joy through the Holy Spirit because of what the Father has been pleased to do (Luke 10:21). The Father declares his delight in the Son and puts his Spirit on him (Matt. 12:18).

The Gospels are not innovating here. The book of Psalms shows God the Father exalting God the Son by anointing him with the oil of joy, which we could be forgiven for thinking represented the Spirit (Ps. 45:6–7; see Heb. 1:9). Proverbs has Wisdom (the Son) rejoicing at the side of God (the Father), saying,

I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always. (Prov. 8:30)

Every time we see the inner life of the Trinity revealed in Scripture, we see a Father, Son, and Spirit who utterly delight in each other, permanently rejoicing in their manifold union. It makes sense when you think about what it means for God to be God. He is the only being who does not depend on anything outside of himself for complete joy: God “blessed forever,” as Paul puts it (Rom. 9:5).

Deep happiness and rich delight also characterize God’s relationship with his people, including you. Many of us find that hard to accept because we don’t feel delightful in the slight-

est; we know how holy he is and how sinful we are, and we worry that God simply sees through us, like a disapproving schoolmaster who knows we will never be good enough. But Scripture pictures God more like a lovestruck bridegroom than a thunderstruck headmaster. “You shall be called My Delight Is in Her,” says the prophet Isaiah, “for the LORD delights in you” (Isa. 62:4).

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5)

Jeremiah, switching the metaphor, compares God’s joy in his people to a father’s joy in his children:

Is not Ephraim my dear son,
the child in whom I delight?
Though I often speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I have great compassion for him. (Jer. 31:20 NIV)

An even more exuberant description of divine delight comes in Zephaniah 3:17:

The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.

When you picture God, is he singing over his people? Delighting, making music, exulting in his children? Celebrating his bride at his own wedding? Because that is how Scripture presents him. For the psalmist, God's delight in us is one of the reasons that we delight in him:

Let them praise his name with dancing,
 making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!
For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
 he adorns the humble with salvation. (Ps. 149:3–4)

God is not only happy in the fellowship of the Trinity or in his people but also delights in all of his works and everything he has made. Psalm 104, for example, is a beautiful song about the range of things God has created, and as it concludes it says simply,

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
 may the LORD rejoice in his works. (Ps. 104:31)

To get a sense of what it sounds like for God to “rejoice in his works,” read through Job 38–41 and notice God's enthusiasm for a remarkably random list of created things: seas and storms, snow and stars, lions, goats, donkeys, ostriches, horses, hawks, Behemoth, Leviathan, and so forth.

We can push this even further: God delights in absolutely everything he does. Psalm 115 declares,

Our God is in the heavens;
 he does all that he pleases. (Ps. 115:3; cf. 135:6)

And if he does all that he pleases, then he takes pleasure in all he does.⁵ This is part of what it means to be God: Nothing and nobody can prevent him from doing what he delights in, which is why he can say, “I will accomplish all my pleasure” (Isa. 46:10 my translation), and why Paul can say that God works all things according to his pleasure (Eph. 1:5, 9).

The Scriptures abound with examples of things that God delights in. He delights in the obedience of the righteous, the destruction of the wicked, the wellbeing of his servants, the fear of the Lord, hope, justice, and the prayers of the upright (Deut. 28:63; 1 Sam. 15:22; Pss. 35:27; 147:11; Prov. 11:1; 15:8). He rejoices in doing good to his people with all his heart and all his soul (Jer. 32:41). It is his “good pleasure” to give the kingdom to a little flock like us (Luke 12:32). Even the cross, despite the painting we saw earlier, is motivated by the pleasure of the Father and the joy of the Son (Isa. 53:12; Heb. 12:2).

God is happy. He is happy in himself, in his people, and in everything he does. That is why Jesus describes the reward for faithfulness as entering into your Master’s happiness. It is why the psalmist describes God’s presence as fullness of joy, with pleasures forever at his right hand, and why one of the most visible results of keeping in step with the Holy Spirit is bearing the fruit of joy (Gal. 5:22). It is why Paul refers to sound doctrine as “the gospel of the glory of the happy God” (1 Tim. 1:11 my translation). God is invisible, but he is invisibly smiling rather than invisibly scowling.

That has wonderful implications. If at the heart of reality is an unchangingly happy Trinity—if the God of all things is

5 See John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Multnomah, 2020), 37–38.

overflowing with joy; permanently delighting in the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit; taking pleasure in his creation; rejoicing in his purposes; delighting in his people; prone to feasts, songs, and jubilant celebration; and working all things toward a future in which everyone lives happily ever after—then it means marvelous things for all of us.

Think about it: It means by definition that becoming more like God means becoming happier. It means that eternity will be spent in the presence of one who is forever drawing us, like a giant magnet, toward his own unbounded joy. It means that the world was not created to ensure God's happiness, as if there was something he needed that only the universe could provide, but to express it. It means God is an overflowing fountain rather than a needy drain, a sunrise rather than a black hole. That is some of the best news you will ever hear.

Our Joy or Our Job?

I am trying to persuade you that God wants you to be happy. The first step in my argument is that God himself is perfectly and deeply happy. The next step is to show that unless we pursue our own joy—in God—we cannot worship or glorify him as he deserves. In an important sense, that is what true worship is. To truly esteem or glorify someone/something is to find our deepest joy in that person/thing, which is why the Scriptures are continually telling us to rejoice, delight, and be glad in the Lord. Nothing is more honoring to a friend, a child, or a spouse than saying they make you happy. Nothing is more demeaning to them than telling them they don't.

Imagine I take my teenage son to watch a football match. At the end of the game he turns to me, gives me a hug, and thanks

me for taking him. Now imagine two possible responses. In the first scenario, I hug him and tell him that it was my pleasure: I tell him how much fun I have had with him, how glad I am that he had a good time, and how there is nothing I would have enjoyed doing more with my afternoon. (Notice that all these responses involve my happiness: my pleasure, the fun I have had, how glad I am, what I would enjoy doing.) In the second scenario, I tell him that he is welcome because it's my job: Taking sons to football matches is the sort of thing that loving fathers do, and maybe one day he will perform the same duty with his own children. The first response is effectively "it's my joy," and the second is "it's my job." Which response honors, esteems, or "glorifies" my son more? The answer is self-evident. We honor people by delighting in them.

Similarly, the best way of glorifying God is to find him utterly delightful and to live in ways that seek to maximize that delight. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever," declares the Westminster Shorter Catechism—a statement that, as John Piper has convincingly shown, means that we glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.⁶ Honoring God is our joy, not merely our job. The call to heartfelt worship is a call to heartfelt happiness.

That is such an important idea. If you think about it, pursuing heartfelt happiness in God is how we enter the kingdom in the first place. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field," Jesus says, "which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44). There is a powerful hedonistic logic to that phrase "in his joy." We encounter Jesus and his reign, and we are so overwhelmed

6 John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Multnomah, 2011), 17–28.

with delight at what we have found and so excited about being able to enjoy him that we give up everything we have in order to get him. That is what conversion is: the realization that all we have—all our possessions, hopes, and relationships—are trivial in comparison to the eternal joy to be found in Jesus. So we sell them all to get the only one who can make us lastingly happy.

Jesus made a similar judgment on his way to the cross. One of the most remarkable statements in Scripture comes in Hebrews 12:2, which tells us that Jesus “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” It is a startling but vital truth: Jesus went to the cross because he was motivated by the joy set before him. He considered the temporary anguish of the cross, weighed it in the balance against the everlasting joy that was available beyond it, and concluded that there was no comparison.

A few verses later, the writer contrasts Jesus’s decision with that of Esau, “who sold his birthright for a single meal” (Heb. 12:16). Jesus went through short-term intense suffering for long-term intense happiness; Esau did the opposite, swapping the riches of God’s favor for a bowl of stew, of all things. Therefore, Hebrews urges us to take our cues from Jesus rather than Esau. Weigh up which course of action will lead to your greatest long-term happiness—temporary comforts or eternal blessings, bowls of stew or birthrights, momentary relief or permanent reward—and take it. For the love of God, do not swap a kingdom for a casserole.

Fountains and Cisterns

The same principle holds for spiritual growth. Pursuing our highest happiness or fighting for our deepest joy is the only viable

way of contending for godliness and fighting against sin in daily life. Sometimes people play off the quests for happiness and holiness against each other. But the reality is that we cannot seek holiness without seeking happiness or vice versa. That sounds strange to our modern ears because we are so used to hearing terms like “pleasure-seeker” and “hedonist” applied to people who do ungodly or wicked things. But biblically, sin results from *not seeking your pleasure enough* rather than seeking it too much.

Moses overcame the lure of treasures and pleasures in his own life not by trying to suppress the desire for joy but by trying to maximize it, “for he was looking to the reward” (Heb. 11:26). Later, he warned Israel that they would have to “serve [their] enemies” if they did not serve the Lord “with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things” (Deut. 28:47–48). Solomon urged his son to delight in his wife, take pleasure in her breasts and be intoxicated with her love, partly as a way of protecting himself against intoxication with the love of someone else (Prov. 5:15–20).

Most vividly, the prophet Jeremiah described idolatry as a willingness to be satisfied by far too little, abandoning the fountain of living waters and then hacking out broken cisterns to drink from instead:

My people have changed their glory
 for that which does not profit.
 Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
 be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD,
 for my people have committed two evils:
 they have forsaken me,
 the fountain of living waters,

and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
 broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer. 2:11–13)

Surely, we think, no sane person would ignore a fountain of fresh water and drink stale, fetid sludge from a broken tank instead. Exactly, says Jeremiah. Yet that is what the people of Israel have done. They have exchanged the refreshing abundance of God's glory for the stagnant dissatisfaction of idols, and it is making them miserable as well as evil.

All of these passages present righteousness as overcoming shallow pleasures—from Egyptian trinkets to standing water—with deeper ones. They present sin, in Lewis's famous analogy, as the result of being "far too easily pleased," fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is available, like a child choosing to make mudpies in a slum because he cannot imagine the delights of a beach holiday.⁷ Conquering sin, in that sense, does not happen by suppressing our desire for happiness. Rather, it comes by exchanging an anemic, wispy source of happiness for a richer and more fulfilling one.

The nineteenth century Scottish pastor Thomas Chalmers calls this "the expulsive power of a new affection." There are two ways of trying to disciple someone away from the love of the world, he argues. One is to demonstrate that loving the world is useless; the other is to show that they will be happier if they exchange their love of the world for the love of God, "so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new

7 C. S. Lewis, *"The Weight of Glory" and Other Addresses* (Harper One, 1980), 26.

one.”⁸ We could call these the negative approach (loving the world is bad) and the positive one (loving God is better). He then goes on to explain that of these two methods, the negative method is utterly useless. Only the positive one has the power we need:

It is thus, that the boy ceases, at length, to be the slave of his *appetite*, but it is because a manlier taste has now brought it into subordination; and that the youth ceases to idolize *pleasure*, but it is because the idol of wealth has become the stronger and gotten the ascendancy; and that even the love of *money* ceases to have the mastery over the heart of many a thriving citizen, but it is because drawn into the whirl of city politics, and he is now lorded over by the love of *power*. There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. . . . The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.⁹

Practically, we all know this. The best way to lose weight is not to focus on the futility and dissatisfaction of eating what you like, but to displace one desire (food) with another one (better health, fitness, body shape, stability of mood, or whatever). The best way to get people off their phones is not to lament the evils of screen time but to awaken the desire for doing something else: reading books, playing sports, creating something, or even (gasp) talking to people in real life. We don’t change because we are convinced that our current habits are pointless or debilitating. We change because we think that doing something else will make us happier

8 Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (London, 1861), 3.

9 Chalmers, *Expulsive Power*, 6, 11 (emphasis added).

than we are now. The only way to get rid of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.

This was Paul's story. He was a bright and diligent young Jewish man with his affections and ambitions bound up with lawkeeping, ethnic identity, and religious observance: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:5–6). Then suddenly he changed and became a zealous follower of Jesus Christ instead. He came to see all these things on which his hopes had rested for so long as loss and garbage. But this was not because someone sat down with him and showed him how useless they were. It was because he encountered something far better:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss *for the sake of Christ*. Indeed, I count everything as loss *because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order *that I may gain Christ and be found in him*, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may *attain the resurrection from the dead*. (Phil. 3:7–11)

When compared with Christ, gains become garbage. Inferior sources of joy are transcended by the delights of knowing Jesus,

like candles in bright sunshine or stagnant water before a fountain. And Paul is not shy about the implications. He makes that very clear by sandwiching this passage between two emphatic exhortations, urging the Philippians to find their happiness in Christ just as he has: “Rejoice in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4).

Conclusion

The big idea of this chapter has been that God is happy and that he wants you to be happy too. The divine invitation to all Christians—and indeed to humanity as a whole—could be expressed in the words of Jesus with which we started this chapter: “Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matt 25:21 NIV).

You may need more convincing. That’s fine; plenty of people smarter than me have written whole books on this subject, clarifying terms and responding to objections.¹⁰ But that’s the five-thousand-word version. God is happy, and it turns out that becoming like him, glorifying him, entering his kingdom, overcoming sin, and imitating Jesus all involve us being happy as well. For the fruit of the Spirit is joy.

In which case we had better work out what happiness is and how to find it.

¹⁰ See Piper, *Desiring God*; Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Tyndale House, 2015); Storms, *Pleasures Evermore*.