

HAPPINESS

God's Invitation to Delight, Celebration, and Joy

RANDY
ALCORN

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About the Author



RANDY ALCORN is an author and the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM), a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God's Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. Randy's ministry focus is communicating the strategic importance of using our earthly time, money, possessions, and opportunities to invest in need-meeting ministries that count for eternity. He accomplishes these goals by analyzing, teaching, and applying biblical truth.

Before starting EPM in 1990, Randy served as a pastor for 14 years. He has a bachelor of theology and a master of arts in biblical studies from Multnomah University and an honorary doctorate from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, and he has taught on the adjunct faculties of both.

A *New York Times* best-selling author, Randy has written more than 40 books, including *Courageous*, *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*. His books sold exceed nine million copies and have been translated into more than 60 languages. Randy has written for many magazines, including EPM's issues-oriented magazine *Eternal Perspectives*. He is active daily on Facebook and Twitter and has been a guest on more than seven hundred radio, television, and online programs, including "Focus on the Family," "FamilyLife Today," "Revive Our Hearts," "The Bible Answer Man," and "The Resurgence."

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon, with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and five grandsons. Randy enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, tennis, research, and reading.

CONTACT ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE MINISTRIES

39085 Pioneer Boulevard; Suite 206; Sandy, OR 97055
503.668.5200; epm.org

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Introduction

Welcome to the Bible study *Happiness: God's Invitation to Delight, Celebration, and Joy*. Together we'll deal with an issue that's important for us as followers of Jesus and critical to our mission of sharing Him with our world.

For 1,800 years the church held a shared understanding of happiness. Preachers and theologians recognized happiness as a good thing God created, and they spoke accordingly. They recognized that the innate desire to be happy motivated people to seek Jesus. The church's message across the centuries was that following Jesus provided the way any person could find forgiveness, meaning, and fulfillment—that is, happiness.

Then over the past hundred years a change occurred. A different idea of happiness took root in the church. Happiness came to be associated with the world. Words like *blessed* and *joy*, which originally meant *happiness*, took on new connotations. Godly, well-meaning believers began to preach and teach that happiness is an enemy of holiness. Christians were told they shouldn't desire happiness but rather an unemotional form of joy. Sadly, in the process many passages of Scripture lost their richness and strength because we no longer understood the true meanings of the words.

We need to reclaim the truths that our desire for happiness is God-given and that Jesus is the way to happiness. We need to reclaim the meanings of numerous biblical words that speak to us of happiness. We need to join God in transforming His church through the happiness He intended for us to enjoy. God knows that all people desire happiness. And He wants them to know that the happiness they seek is found in a relationship with Him.

How to Use This Study

This study is designed to take place over six weeks. One week of Bible study is devoted to each topic, and each week is divided into three sections of personal study:

The Big Idea

Digging Deeper

Gospel Application

In the personal study you'll find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, six group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into three sections:

START focuses participants on the topic of the session's video teaching.

WATCH provides key ideas presented in the video.

RESPOND guides the group in a discussion of the video teaching.

Each week during the group session, you'll watch a 10- to 15-minute video in which Randy Alcorn will introduce the main idea of that week's study. The group guide will help your group get started, watch the video, and discuss the subject. After the first week you'll also discuss what you studied during the previous week's personal study.

This Bible study is distilled from the book *Happiness*. If you want to go deeper, you'll find many more Scriptures and examples in that book (Tyndale, ISBN 978-1-4143-8934-9).

Tips for Leading a Small Group

Prayerfully Prepare

Prepare for each group session with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

REVIEW the weekly material and group questions ahead of time.

PRAY for each person in the group.

Minimize Distractions

Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience.

TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION seating, temperature, lighting, refreshments, surrounding noise, and general cleanliness.

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted.

HAPPINESS

Include Others

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to include and invite.

INCLUDE anyone who visits the group.

INVITE new people to join your group.

Encourage Discussion

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

Keep Connecting

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

ENCOURAGE GROUP MEMBERS with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through emails, texts, and social media.

BUILD DEEPER FRIENDSHIPS by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for meals; fun activities; and projects around your home, church, or community.



The background is a solid teal color with a faint, repeating pattern of leaves and branches. A white rectangular box with a thin grey border is centered on the page.

Week 1
**HAPPINESS
VS. JOY**

START

Welcome to session 1 of *Happiness*. Open the group session by asking participants to introduce themselves and to give quick answers to the following questions.

What's your name, and what are three things that make you happy?

Has what you've learned as a Christian given you a generally positive or negative view of happiness? Why?

Do you think people would describe your church as a happy place? Why or why not?

Until recently, the church talked a lot about happiness. The general message could be summarized like this: Jesus Christ is the key to happiness. If you want to find happiness, follow Jesus. Sin brings misery, but following Jesus brings heartfelt fulfillment.

For complex reasons the Christian view of happiness began to change near the start of the 20th century. Preachers began to warn against pursuing happiness. They began to make a distinction between joy and happiness.

Read together Isaiah 52:7-9.

Watch the video for session 1, in which Randy Alcorn tells about his own journey with the word *happiness*. He introduces our study and begins to explain why believers in our day need to reclaim the truth that Jesus offers what the world needs—the path to an eternity of happiness.

HAPPINESS

WATCH

Happiness is a bridge to the world that we need to reach. We should not burn that bridge.

Joy in God and gladness in God and merriment in God and happiness in God are all interchangeable in meaning.

We all are happiness seekers. The Bible says we are to find our happiness, our delight, our joy, our gladness in God.

The good news of happiness is the good news of the gospel.

Scripture makes happiness dependent on Christ—who He is, His faithfulness, what He's done for you, and what He promises you for all eternity.

Video sessions available for purchase at www.lifeway.com/happiness

RESPOND

Do you agree with Randy's statement that "happiness is a bridge to the world that we need to reach"? If so, what happens when we burn that bridge?

Compare Romans 10:15 to Isaiah 52:7. In what ways do you understand the gospel to be "good news of happiness" (Isa. 52:7, ESV)?

What different results would you expect from living out either of the following statements?

1. Seeking happiness displeases God.
2. God wants us to seek happiness in Him. Jesus went to the cross to bring us eternal happiness, as well as present joy that can get us through life's toughest times.

How did Randy distinguish the Bible's message of happiness from prosperity theology (the health-and-wealth gospel)?

How do 1 Peter 4:12 and James 1:2 differ from the prosperity idea that if we have enough faith, God will do what we want Him to do?

Randy said happiness isn't automatic. What are some choices we can make that will enhance our happiness? What are choices that will destroy our happiness?

In closing, pray that God will show us how to reclaim the biblical teaching on happiness and use that bridge to bring the gospel of happiness to our needy world.

Complete the three personal-study sections on the following pages before the next group session. One section will focus on the big idea for the week, the second section will dig deeper into this big idea, and the third section will examine practical steps we can take to enjoy Christ's happiness.

HAPPINESS

THE BIG IDEA

*Sing, Jerusalem.
Israel, shout for joy!
Jerusalem, be happy
and rejoice with all your heart.*

ZEPHANIAH 3:14, NCV

God made human beings as He made His other creatures, to be happy. ... They are in their right element when they are happy.¹

CHARLES SPURGEON

Does God Want Us to Be Happy?

Among Christ followers *happiness* was once a positive, desirable word. But over the past century teachers began to set happiness and joy at odds with each other. They've promoted the idea that happiness is an inferior, unspiritual, and worldly state. They say believers should aspire to joy, which is less emotional or not emotional at all. I believe this teaching is biblically and historically ungrounded and has significant downsides.

As we begin our study together, take the following pretest. Beside each statement record a number from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 uncertain, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. Respond according to the way you've felt and thought over your Christian life.

- ___ God Himself is very happy.
- ___ To be Christlike is, among other things, to be happy.
- ___ Happiness and joy are basically the same thing.
- ___ God wants us to experience happiness.
- ___ God's wrath is a response to sin, but joy is His nature.
- ___ God's Word teaches His people how to be happy.
- ___ A proper response to God results in greater happiness.
- ___ Total

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. I recognize that my happiness pretest is somewhat subjective. You could have scored from 7 to 35. A score of 7 would indicate a view of God as harsh, desiring grim obedience from His people. A score of 35 would suggest a view of God as cheerful and happy. We'll revisit the test at the end of our study of happiness.

I recall a conversation with a young woman who viewed the Christian life as one of utter dullness. She knew following Christ was the right thing to do, but she was certain it would mean sacrificing her happiness. So where did this young woman, who was raised in a fine Christian family and church, acquire such an unbiblical notion? What are we doing—what are we missing—that leaves many of our children and our churches laboring under such false impressions?

British preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834–92) 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.²

Our happiness makes the gospel contagiously appealing; our unhappiness makes it alarmingly unattractive.

Do you think the church today is known more for happiness or unhappiness? Why?

Many of us have been told by well-meaning teachers that Christians shouldn't seek happiness. We've been taught an imaginary form of joy, devoid of emotion—joy without happiness (as if unhappy joy were even possible).

Where would you say your experience has fallen between severely prohibiting any display of happiness or completely embracing a free celebration of happiness? Mark a representative point on the scale.

PROHIBITING HAPPINESS

EMBRACING HAPPINESS

HAPPINESS

Why do you suppose we often think it would be unspiritual for the Christian life to be lived in light of what God calls the “good news of happiness” (Isa. 52:7, ESV)? Celebration and gladness of heart have characterized the church, including the suffering church, throughout history. Scripturally, the culture of God’s people is one of joy, happiness, and gratitude. It’s not the people who know God who have reason to be miserable; it’s those who don’t. But in recent times Christ followers have become known for saying things like “God wants you blessed, not happy”;³ “God doesn’t want you to be happy. God wants you to be holy”;⁴ and “God doesn’t want you to be happy, he wants you to be strong.”⁵ But does the message that God doesn’t want us to be happy promote the good news or obscure it?

Why do you suppose Christians have so often portrayed joy as good for believers but happiness as a bad?

What good purpose do you think those who have taught the split between joy and happiness were seeking to achieve, or what dangers were they seeking to avoid?

Choosing Sides

I think at least part of what drives the distinction between joy and happiness comes from fear. We observe that people pursue happiness in sin and thereby destroy their lives. We confuse the desire to be happy with sinful attempts to fulfill that drive. Then instead of opposing sin, we find ourselves opposing happiness. Maybe we need to step back and realize that we’ve made a well-intended mistake.

We need to make clear that we find true happiness in a relationship with God. He warns us about pursuing false gods because they don’t lead to happiness. God prohibits sinful pursuits of happiness specifically because they destroy genuine happiness. God never says no to happiness. He says no to what makes lasting happiness impossible.

We need to beware of putting God on the side of holiness and Satan on the side of happiness. The Devil has mastered this strategy. His lie from the beginning was that God doesn't care about our good. But the truth is, God wants us to seek real happiness in Him, while Satan wants us to seek imitation holiness that stems 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, ESV

Why do you think rejecting happiness might appeal to our prideful inner Pharisee?

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 isn't about happiness; he's 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.

Give three examples of ways Satan dispenses rat poison in colorful, happy-looking wrappers. (For example, an advertisement that promotes a luxury item as a means to freedom. For most of us, that item would result in debt and greater bondage rather than freedom.)

1.

2.

3.

HAPPINESS

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.

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.⁶

Can you identify something you once thought would make you happy but didn't? Why do you think it didn't work, and for what do you think you were really longing?

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 in the gospel.

God used my persistent desire for happiness to prepare me for the gospel message. The "good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10, ESV) 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. If I had been happy without Jesus, I never would have turned to Him.

How does happiness in Christ affect your motivation, attitudes, and actions? How do these change if you find happiness in something else?

In what ways is happiness in Christ superior to anything the world offers?

A Balanced Perspective

It seems to me there are two extremes of Christians when it comes to happiness. Some change the channel from the coverage of a hurricane, refuse to think about sex trafficking and abortion, and ignore the sufferings of this world while grabbing on to superficial living. They look the other way when their marriages are in trouble or when their children choose the wrong friends, yet they keep claiming Jesus' promise of easy lives without suffering. Never mind that Jesus never made such a promise!

Other Christians are perpetually somber, never laughing or poking fun at themselves, rarely celebrating, and quick to frown when they see someone having fun. Shoulders sagging, they believe happiness is ungodliness.

The Bible presents a more balanced perspective. Paul said he was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10, ESV). Sorrow and joy can and do coexist for now. Notice that the *always* in this verse is applied to rejoicing, not being sorrowful.

It's not insensitive, unkind, or wrong to be happy. By being happy in Christ, we lay claim to the fact that God is bigger than the fall, and we affirm that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will reverse the curse and reign over a new universe. Our happiness shouts that our God is present with us and is at work in the world every minute of every hour of every day. The narrower our view of God's presence in this world—and in our daily lives—the less happiness we'll experience.

The world has divorced Christianity from happiness, and we Christ followers are partly responsible. People today perceive that Christianity is about tradition and morality, not happiness. I make no apologies for believing in morality. But some Christians, in the name of moral obligation, go around with frowns on their faces, dutifully living a paint-by-the-numbers religious existence and proudly refraining from what "lesser" people do to be happy. They seem to wear their displeasure as a badge of honor.

Someone has said:

Jesus promised his disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble.⁷

It might be argued that most Western Christians aren't any of these three—but least of all, "absurdly happy."

Close this section of our study by making a list of reasons we Christ followers have to be absurdly happy. In the next section we'll turn to what the Bible says about the basic issue of happiness.

HAPPINESS

DIGGING DEEPER

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

JOEL 2:21

Say night and morning, and whenever through the day you think of it, “Dear Lord make me happy in you,” and leave it there. All the rest will come out right when once you are happy in Him.⁸

HANNAH WHITALL SMITH

What Does the Bible Say?

In our day an ungrounded, dangerous separation of joy from happiness has infiltrated the Christian community. I’m trying to do my part to reclaim the territory Christians have relinquished. You’ll note that I begin each section with quotations by believers of the past to show their embrace of happiness. Contrast those words with the artificial distinctions made by modern Christians:

Joy is something entirely different from happiness. Joy is not an emotion. ... Joy brings us peace in the middle of a storm. Joy is something that God deposits into us through the Holy Spirit. ... There is a big difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is an emotion and temporary; joy is an attitude of the heart.⁹

Later we’ll explore the sources of this antihappiness teaching. For now how do you react to the quotation you just read?

Judging from such articles (and there are hundreds more out there), you’d think the distinction between joy and happiness is biblical. It’s not.

John Piper writes:

If you have nice little categories for “joy is what Christians have” and “happiness is what the world has,” you can scrap those when you go to the Bible, because the Bible is indiscriminate in its uses of the language of happiness and joy and contentment and satisfaction.¹⁰

Joni Eareckson Tada writes:

Scripture uses the terms [*joy* and *happiness*] interchangeably along with words like *delight*, *gladness*, *blessed*. There is no scale of relative spiritual values applied to any of these. Happiness is not relegated to fleshly-minded sinners nor joy to heaven-bound saints.¹¹

My purpose in this section is to demonstrate from Scripture the truth of Piper's and Tada's words. The Bible speaks of happiness—often. It uses many words that mean *happiness*. It even commands us to seek happiness in Jesus.

I recognize that we can quickly get buried in word studies and translations. I could drown us in hundreds of passages. Instead, we'll just look at a few representative examples. A concordance will confirm that Scripture contains hundreds more. Consider the following biblical evidence of God's intention for our happiness.

Joy Involves Happiness

The Bible employs words with similar meanings used in proximity to reinforce their meaning. We do the same. If someone says, "I expected the party to be fun and exciting, but it turned out to be dull and boring," the words *fun* and *exciting* are synonyms, as are *dull* and *boring*; they reinforce each other. More than one hundred verses in various translations use *joy* and *happiness* together. Notice that *joy* and *happiness* in the following passages are clearly synonyms.

Circle the parallel (synonymous) words used with *happy* in these passages.

*Don't you know that . . . the joy of the wicked has been brief
and the happiness of the godless has lasted only a moment?*

JOB 20:4-5, HCSB

*May the righteous be glad
and rejoice before God;
may they be happy and joyful.*

PSALM 68:3, NIV

*Happy are the people who know the joyful shout;
Yahweh, they walk in the light of Your presence.*

PSALM 89:15, HCSB

HAPPINESS

These passages refute two common claims: (1) that the Bible doesn't talk about happiness and (2) that joy and happiness have contrasting meanings. In fact, the Bible overflows with examples to the contrary. Depicting joy in contrast with happiness has obscured the true meanings of both words. Joyful people are typically glad and cheerful; they smile and laugh a lot. To put it plainly, they're happy!

Words from Scripture

I've studied more than 2,700 Scripture passages in which words such as *joy*, *happiness*, *gladness*, *merriment*, *pleasure*, *celebration*, *cheer*, *laughter*, *delight*, *jubilation*, *feasting*, *exultation*, and *celebration* are used. Throw in the words *blessed* and *blessing*, which often connote happiness, and the number increases.

God is clear in His Word that seeking happiness—or joy, gladness, delight, or pleasure—through sin is wrong and fruitless. But seeking happiness in God is good and right.

How would you describe the difference between seeking happiness through sin and seeking happiness in God?

What different results come from the two approaches to seeking happiness?

While no real difference exists between happiness and joy, an immense difference separates seeking happiness in God and seeking it in sin. Not the least of these differences is God's desire that we find one and avoid the other.

Scripture Commands Happiness

Jesus said:

*Until now you have asked nothing in my name.
Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*

JOHN 16:24, ESV

The Contemporary English Version and God's Word Translation both render the final clause in this verse so that we will be "completely happy." Can our joy be full if we're not happy?

Summarize the following Scriptures. Though the version you're reading may say it with different words, they're both commands to be happy.

Psalm 81:1

Matthew 5:12

The Bible clearly commands us to be happy. You may not be accustomed to thinking this way, but it's a fact. And I'm confident it's a command most of us would like to obey.

Put yourself in God's shoes for a moment. I know it's a stretch, but humor me. If you were God, why might you want your people to be happy?

What might result when God's people are happy?

What might happen if God's people are unhappy?

Scripture confirms that God wants us to be happy. We can speculate about His reasons: because of His nature, because of the different response we have to Him when we're happy, just because He loves us, or other possibilities. The bottom line is that God values our happiness. We also reflect His character better and attract people to Him when we're happy.

Is Joy an Emotion?

A Christian writer says:

We don't get joy by seeking a better emotional life, because joy is not an emotion. It is a settled certainty that God is in control.¹²

HAPPINESS

Another says, “Joy is not an emotion. It is a choice.”¹³ The idea that “joy is not an emotion” promotes an unbiblical myth.

Speculate a moment. What kinds of interpersonal results do you think might occur if you minimize the importance of happiness?

With your spouse or friends:

With your children or others’ children:

In your employment and workplace relationships:

In your relationship with God:

In your efforts to share Christ:

One Bible study says, “Spiritual joy is not an emotion. It’s a response to a Spirit-filled life.”¹⁴ But if this response doesn’t involve emotions of happiness or gladness, what makes it joy?

A hundred years ago every Christian knew the meaning of *joy*. Today if you ask a group of Christians, “What does joy mean?” most will grope for words, with only one emphatic opinion: that joy is different from happiness. This is like saying rain isn’t wet or ice isn’t cold. Scripture, dictionaries, and common language don’t support this separation in meaning.

An Essential Component of the Gospel

The angel’s message to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus condenses the gospel to its core. He said:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

LUKE 2:10, ESV

The gospel isn’t for some; it’s for all. The Greek adjective translated *great* here is *meGas*. This isn’t just news but good news of megajoy. It’s the best news there has ever been or ever will be.

What about the message of Luke 2:10 makes you happy?

This good news is deep, everlasting joy for any who will receive it. The CEV renders the verse this way: “good news for you, which will make everyone happy.”

The important messianic proclamation in Isaiah 52:7 proclaims:

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness.*

ISAIAH 52:7, ESV

God tells us directly that our mission is to make known the “good news of happiness.”

How would you explain to someone who hasn't trusted Jesus that
His good news will bring them happiness?

Paul clearly referred to Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:15 as he demonstrated that this “good news of happiness” is in fact nothing else but the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. If the gospel we preach isn't about happiness, then it contradicts the direct words of God in Isaiah 52:7. The gospel offers an exchange of misery-generating sin for happiness-giving righteousness provided by Jesus Himself.

Delivery from eternal damnation is delivery from eternal misery. Eternal life grants eternal happiness. The happiness humans lost when our sin alienated us from God can be regained in Christ. What better qualifies as the “good news of happiness”?

Read Matthew 25:21. What mind-boggling invitation did Jesus extend?
How does Jesus make that possible?

The true gospel can't be improved on. Theologian J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) said, “In the gospel there is included all that the heart of man can wish.”¹⁵

What do we wish for most? Our happiness is certainly not the only thing the gospel is about. However, it's one of the wonderful things Christ accomplished through His redemptive work.

Close this portion of study with a time of prayer. Record or tell God
how you feel about His invitation to megahappiness.

HAPPINESS

GOSPEL APPLICATION

All the people of Judah were happy because they had made this covenant with all their heart. They took delight in worshiping the LORD, and he accepted them and gave them peace on every side.

2 CHRONICLES 15:15, GNT

Persons need not and ought not to set any bounds to their spiritual and gracious appetites. Rather, they ought to be endeavoring by all possible ways to inflame their desires and to obtain more spiritual pleasures.¹⁶

JONATHAN EDWARDS

How Do We Do It?

In this third section of each week's study, we'll explore the practical matter of how to obey God's command to be happy. This week we've targeted a modest but critical part of that journey: we need to understand how we came to the odd place of separating happiness from God. The church through the ages hasn't been opposed to happiness. That opposition in the church is recent.

How did you initially react to Jonathan Edwards's quotation above?

- ☐ I'm surprised to hear a Puritan preacher promote inflamed desires.
- ☐ I wonder whether he just meant desires for spiritual blessings.
- ☐ Of course, I want to enjoy life with Christ to the fullest.
- ☐ Other:

In stark contrast with past believers, many modern Christians have portrayed happiness as, at best, inferior to joy and, at worst, evil. My first pastor often cited Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*, and I eagerly read that great book as a young Christian. But at the time I didn't know enough to disagree with his statement:

Joy should not be confused with happiness. In fact, it is an insult to Jesus Christ to use the word *happiness* in connection with Him.¹⁷

I certainly didn't want to insult Jesus, so after reading this and many similar statements, I became wary of happiness. These proclamations were common enough that it seemed they must be right. But they made me uneasy, because before reading such things and hearing them from the pulpit, I had celebrated my newfound happiness in Christ. Now I was being told that happiness was at least suspect and apparently even unspiritual, and it shouldn't be part of a serious Christian life.

To me, this position was counterintuitive. Of course, we shouldn't turn to sin for happiness, but happiness was something I gained when I came to Christ, not something I gave up. If it was God who made me happy to be forgiven and gave me the joy of a right relationship with Him and the privilege of walking with Him and serving Him, was God really against my happiness?

What reasons might good and godly teachers have to conclude that happiness is an insult to Jesus?

Have you ever entertained the idea that people outside Christ are the ones having a good time? What might cause us to think that way?

Do you believe disregarding or being ignorant of God and His demands can enhance anyone's happiness? Why or why not?

Read Psalm 1 from your Bible (it's only six verses). Who did the psalmist say will be happy? What fate does the psalm ascribe to someone who disregards God?

I hope you agree that true happiness always lies in the direction of knowing God. Even though knowing God's demands causes us discomfort because we fall short of them, we still find true joy and happiness when we repent and return to Him. Certainly a worldly joy can come to those who've rejected God and His demands. Sin can bring pleasure for a season (see Heb. 11:25), but the end result of that pleasure is the way of death (see Prov. 14:12; 16:25).

HAPPINESS

Identify several ways the world seeks happiness.

What are the consequences of seeking happiness in those ways?

The First Principle

At the risk of wearing the uniform of Captain Obvious, I must reiterate the truth that obeying God is the first principle of happiness. We need to staple that truth to our frontal cortex like an Old Testament phylactery, specifically because God's way often leads to hard places. Often it looks as if those who ignore God are most happy and as if obedience leads us in directions that aren't fun. But looks can be deceiving.

Look at Psalm 73, in which the psalmist honestly confessed his envy of the wicked. In verses 1-7 what did he say about the happiness of those who reject God?

The psalmist was wise enough to recognize that he was on shaky ground. He said his feet almost slipped because he envied the arrogant. We need to be very careful to separate genuine happiness from the imitation variety found in disobedience to God.

What attitude might develop in believers who think that sinners are genuinely happy and that following Christ means living by rules that prevent enjoyment?

Real happiness is contagious. Sadly, however, misery also loves company. The church through the ages has had both those who've served God in poverty and humility yet with great happiness and those who've sought to please God by making themselves as miserable as possible.

Happiness Belongs to the Believer

In pursuing happiness, we want our focus to be on Christ, not on people. So I won't ask you if you've known Christians who give people the impression that following Jesus means misery. Instead, I want to begin a theme we'll revisit throughout our study.

What change do you think it would make if your church were known in the community as the place to find the happiest people whose joy overflows in everything the members do?

Would you pray that you, your family, and your church will be infused with Jesus' happiness, not just for selfish reasons but so that the lost world will see the joy of the Lord? Record your prayer below.

I'm convinced that no biblical or historical basis exists to define *happiness* as inherently sinful. Unfortunately, because they've seen people trying to find happiness in sin, some Bible teachers have concluded that pursuing happiness is sinful. Such teachers have taught:

Joy is not happiness; there is no mention in the Bible of happiness for a Christian, but there is plenty said about joy.¹⁸

The problem with that statement is that it simply isn't true. Along with the passages we've seen so far, there are hundreds of other verses that disprove it. Here are some, and keep in mind that they were all originally spoken to believers:

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

JOHN 13:17, KJV

Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

ROMANS 14:22, KJV

We count them happy which endure.

JAMES 5:11, KJV

HAPPINESS

If ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye.

1 PETER 3:14, KJV

If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye.

1 PETER 4:14, KJV

How, then, can great Bible teachers and Christ followers claim the Bible doesn't mention happiness for a Christian? We all have a tendency to confuse what the Bible says with what we think it says. Many times we go three steps past what Scripture actually says and then build a castle on our opinions. Even worse, we sometimes attack others who don't agree with our opinions.

Whatever else we take from this week of study, let's do what Peter instructed:

*All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another,
because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.*

1 PETER 5:5, HCSB

Our humility will go far in mending the damage some of our attitudes may have incurred.

How can we practice humility in our Bible study while still seeking full faithfulness to God's Word? Share your thoughts with your small group.

The Happiest People in the World

Regardless of the arguments made from the pulpit, in Christian books, and in personal conversations, people have always wanted to be happy—and they always will. So when we hear that we shouldn't want to be happy, it doesn't change a thing, except to make us feel guilty and hopeless as we continue to desire and pursue happiness.

Forcing a choice between happiness and holiness is utterly foreign to a biblical worldview. If it were true that God commands us only to be holy, wouldn't we expect Philippians 4:4 to say, "Be holy in the Lord always" instead of "Rejoice in the Lord always" (ESV)?

Carefully read the following explanation by A. W. Tozer of why “the people of God ought to be the happiest people in all the wide world!”¹⁹

Goodness is that in God which desires the happiness of His creatures and that irresistible urge in God to bestow blessedness [happiness]. The goodness of God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His people. ... For a long time it has been drummed into us that if we are happy, God is worried about us. We believe He’s never quite pleased if we are happy. But the strict, true teaching of the Word is that God takes pleasure in the pleasure of His people, provided His people take pleasure in God.²⁰

Paraphrase Tozer’s point.

To declare joy sacred and happiness secular closes the door to dialogue with unbelievers. If someone is told that joy is the opposite of happiness, any thoughtful person would say, “In that case I don’t want joy!”

If we say the gospel won’t bring happiness, any perceptive listener should respond, “Then how is it good news?”

We need to reverse the trend. Let’s redeem the word *happiness* in light of both Scripture and church history. Our message shouldn’t be “Don’t seek happiness” but “You’ll find in Jesus the happiness you’ve always longed for.”

Describe the happiness Jesus has brought to your life.

Who are some people in your life who need the happiness Jesus brings?

End your study with a prayer that God will help you show them His happiness.

Discover the Biblical Meaning of Happiness

Christians are supposed to be happy. In fact, we're supposed to radiate joy, peace, and contentment that are so unmistakable and so attractive that others are naturally drawn to us because they want what we have. And yet in today's culture the vast majority of Christians are perceived as angry, judgmental people who don't seem to derive any joy from life. So why aren't we happy? Unfortunately, many Christians are taught early on that God doesn't want us to be happy, just holy. In fact, many Christians labor under the false notion that God Himself isn't happy. But nothing could be further from the truth.

In *Happiness* Randy Alcorn dispels centuries of misconceptions about happiness and provides indisputable proof that God not only wants us to be happy but also commands it in the pages of His Word.

Reclaim the truth that Jesus is the way to
HAPPINESS.

ALSO AVAILABLE

Happiness Bible Study Kit includes resources for leading a six-session group study: one Bible study book, one hardcover book, and two DVDs that feature Randy Alcorn teaching the study. Item 005781264

E-book and video sessions available at lifeway.com/happiness

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