

"I can give no higher recommendation than this book—I want to give this one to everyone I know. Ten stars." —ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author of *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Greatest Gift*

HAPPINESS



RANDY
ALCORN

Happiness

Part 1: Our Compelling Quest for Happiness

Chapter 3

DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

Cornerstone Community Church

IMPACT Hour

Clay Stidham, Jr.

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

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.*

CHARLES SPURGEON

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

- **HAPPINESS IS GOD'S COMMAND**
- C. S. Lewis said, "It is a Christian duty . . . for everyone to be as happy as he can."
- Happiness is a privilege.
- However, since God repeatedly calls upon us to rejoice, delight, and be glad in him, we have an obligation to actually do so.
- This makes sense only if:
 - the God we love is happy,
 - if the gospel message we embrace and proclaim is happy,
 - and if Heaven is a happy place.
- It makes sense if we understand that people long to be happy and won't turn to Jesus if they believe there's no happiness in him.
- Others will judge whether there's happiness in Jesus by whether they see happiness in his followers.
- Hence, our happiness is, indeed, a Christian duty.

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

- **HAPPINESS IS GOD’S COMMAND**
- Paul’s words in Philippians 4:4 are often translated “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”
- They could also be translated, “Be happy in the Lord always, and again I say be happy.”
- Commenting on this verse, Spurgeon said,
 - “It is intended that we should be happy. That is the meaning . . . that we should be cheerful.”
- This passage commands us twice to be glad in God.
- A command carries with it the duty to obey, and when it’s repeated, that expectation is intensified.
- Fortunately, when God commands us to rejoice, his Holy Spirit empowers us to obey.

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

- **HAPPINESS IS GOD'S COMMAND**

- God could have stated, “You have cause to rejoice.” But a command is different from a statement. A command doesn't leave us the option to passively wait for joy, hoping it comes to us. Rather, we must take action to lay hold of joy in God.
- The command to be sexually pure and abstain from immorality requires proactive choices (see 1 Thessalonians 4:3).
- Similarly, to glorify God in all we do requires actions on our part.
- The same is true of the command to rejoice.
- The fact that “rejoice” is followed by “always” and is repeated (“*again I say rejoice*”) makes it one of the most emphatic directives in Scripture.
- If we've given up on happiness, we're missing out on what God intends for us.

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

- **HAPPINESS IS GOD'S COMMAND**
- Only if we truly want to experience the happiness-driven desires of our hearts will we be drawn to God by verses such as this:
 - “Seek your happiness in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desire” (Psalm 37:4, GNT).
- Judging by what we hear, we might expect Scripture to say, “Obey God, and say no to your heart’s desire.” Not so!
- Jesus says,
 - “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24).
 - The Contemporary English Version and God’s Word Translation both render the final clause in John 16:24 this way: **so that we will be “completely happy.”**
- Can our joy be full if we’re not happy? No.
- The CEV, a translation from the original biblical languages (not a paraphrase), says:
 - Be happy and shout to God who makes us strong! (Psalm 81:1)
 - Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:12)

Chapter 3: DOES GOD WANT US TO BE HAPPY?

- **HAPPINESS IS GOD’S COMMAND**
- The Bible clearly *commands* us to be happy. “But that’s just one English version,” someone might say.
- Correct.
- But every other version echoes the same command even when using other words. The CEV isn’t alone in its translation of these and similar passages.
- The Good News Translation says:
 - Be happy with your wife and find your joy with the woman you married. (Proverbs 5:18)
 - Go ahead-eat your food and be happy; drink your wine and be cheerful. It’s all right with God. (Ecclesiastes 9:7)
 - Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15)
- You may not be accustomed to thinking that God commands us to be happy. But it’s a fact, and a command most of us would like to obey!
- Some have an intuitive resistance to the notion that happiness is unbiblical, and so we should.
 - A blogger says,
 - “Happiness isn’t in the Bible? But what about all the commands to rejoice? What about laughter? Please tell me I’m not supposed to always be heavy-hearted, trudging along and begrudging obedience. I want to be a happy Christian!”

SCRIPTURE CONFIRMS THAT GOD WANTS US HAPPY.

- There are more than 2,700 Scripture passages where 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 that seeking happiness-or joy, gladness, delight, or pleasure-through sin is wrong and fruitless.
- But seeking happiness in Him is good and right.
- Alcorn most often cites the English Standard Version (ESV) in this book, which doesn't use the word *happy* nearly as often as many translations, but it's still there:

SCRIPTURE CONFIRMS THAT GOD WANTS US HAPPY.

- Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? (Deuteronomy 33:29)
- Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy. (1 Kings 4:20)
- Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! (1 Kings 10:8)
- 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)
- Even without the word *happiness*, the concept is unmistakable in passages such as these:
 - Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. (Ecclesiastes 9:9)
 - All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the **cheerful of heart** has a continual feast. (Proverbs 15:15)
- Most translations render the phrase “cheerful of heart” or “cheerful heart.”
 - Two say “glad heart,” and one says “gladness of heart.”
 - Four, including the King James Version, say “merry heart.”
 - Five, including the New Living Translation, render it “happy heart.”
- **Which is correct? All of them. These words are synonyms.**

SCRIPTURE CONFIRMS THAT GOD WANTS US HAPPY.

- Even Jeremiah, who's called "the weeping prophet" since he was brokenhearted over the tragic suffering of God's people, spoke prophecies of happiness.
 - Hear the word of the LORD. . . . [My people] will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD. . . . They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. JEREMIAH 31:10, 12-13, NIV
- That's a lot of joy for a weeping prophet!
- Consider the Psalms, which reflect both great sorrow and great happiness:
 - I will be happy and rejoice in you! I will sing praises to you, O sovereign One! (Psalm 9:2, NET)
 - You will fill me with joy when I am with you. You will make me happy forever at your right hand. (Psalm 16:11, NIRV)
 - God, your love is so precious! . . . [People] eat the rich food in your house, and you let them drink from your river of pleasure. (Psalm 36:7-8, NCV)
 - I will go to your altar, O God; you are the source of my happiness. I will play my harp and sing praise to you, O God, my God. (Psalm 43:4, GNT)
- As Jeremiah and Jesus wept, we, too, will sometimes weep-and we should.
- But if we're not experiencing happiness in God, then we're not obeying God's commands and we're missing out on the abundant life Jesus came to give us. (John 10:10)

MODERN CHRISTIANS NEED TO SPEAK MORE, NOT LESS, ABOUT HAPPINESS.

- Many people believe that following Christ is the right thing to do, but they are certain it means sacrificing happiness.
- It isn't in our nature to continually say no to what we believe would make us happy-or say yes to something that would make us unhappy.
- Why do so many people have this view of Christ, and the Church; that being a Christian comes at the expense of happiness?
- What are we doing? What are we missing? What creates this impression?
- Why do we think it is unspiritual to live a Christian life centered on what God calls the "Good News of Happiness" (Isaiah 52:7)
- 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, gratitude, eating and drinking, singing and dancing, and making music.
- It's not the people who know God who have reason to be miserable-it's those that *don't*.
- When our face to the world is one of anger, misery, shame, cowardice, or defensiveness, the gospel we speak of doesn't appear to be the good news of happiness.
- And we shouldn't be surprised if people, both outside and inside the church, aren't attracted to it. ***Why should they be?***

JOY AND LAUGHTER SHOULD BE THE CHURCH'S NORM, NOT THE EXCEPTION.

- Children who grow up seeing church as a morose, hypercritical place will turn their backs on it in their quest for happiness.
- Those who have found happiness in the church will usually stay or return.
- Sadly, many non-Christian young adults today view Christ's followers as "hypocritical," "insensitive," and "judgmental."
- These words all describe unhappy people.
 - (If the world judges us, so be it, but it shouldn't be because we're chronically unhappy.)
- It seems to me there are two extremes of Christians when it comes to happiness.
 - Some ignore the sufferings of this world while grabbing on to superficial living.
 - Other Christians are perpetually somber, never laughing or poking fun at themselves, rarely celebrating, and quick to frown when they see someone having fun. They believe that happiness is ungodliness
- The Bible presents a more balanced perspective.
- Paul said he was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Sorrow and joy can and do coexist, for now.
 - If we constantly focus on all that's wrong with the world, then sorrow or anger will be our default.
 - But the apostle Paul, writing from prison in Rome, calls on us to **rejoice in the Lord** not periodically, but **always**.

JOY AND LAUGHTER SHOULD BE THE CHURCH'S NORM, NOT THE EXCEPTION.

- 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 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 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.
- Parents repeat instructions to children because kids tend to miss it the first time. Hence Paul said, "Again I will say, rejoice" (Philippians 4:4).
- He wanted to make sure we'd get it.
- Synonyms for happiness appear repeatedly throughout Scripture.
- If God says it enough, shouldn't we get it?
- Still, most of us have failed to notice the cumulative force of the biblical revelation that we are to be consistently happy in God.

GROWING IN OUR HAPPINESS IN CHRIST IS A PROCESS.

- The bride of Christ matures incrementally. As we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18), we grow in joy.
- Paul depicted the gradual process of growth in Christlikeness this way:
 - “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV).
- With ever-increasing glory comes ever-increasing happiness in our Lord. Sin loses its hold on us-largely because we see the misery it brings.
- We begin to ask ourselves, “How could I believe for a moment that sin could bring me happiness?”
- We also learn from adversity.
- When our perspective and our faith are put to the test, our happiness can flourish.
- That’s why so many passages surprise us by connecting rejoicing with trials (see James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 2 Corinthians 8:2-3; Hebrews 10:34).

OUR PURSUIT OF GENUINE HAPPINESS IN GOD HONORS HIM.

- Puritan Jonathan Edwards made a resolution that speaks volumes:
 - “Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigour, and vehemence . . . I am capable of.”
- Puritans, Richard Sibbes did not demean the quest for happiness; rather, he saw Jesus as the proper object of that quest:
 - “Only to a true Christian, by a supernatural light, is discovered both the right object, and the right way to felicity (Happiness).”
- C. S. Lewis said,
 - “The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water.”
- Alcorn states,
 - “When we obey God we do it first for him, but *also* for ourselves,” is biblical. We should seek to please and find pleasure in God, and we’re right to oppose the superficial self-centered happiness of prosperity theology. But we’re wrong to suppose that God doesn’t care about our happiness.”

SCRIPTURE'S GOOD NEWS IS OF "GREAT JOY," NOT "GREAT DUTY."

- Obeying God and worshiping him really *should* make us happy! And God finds pleasure in that kind of happiness.
 - "Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant" (Psalm 135:3, NKJV).
- Whom is it pleasant for? Hopefully for God, but the inspired text speaks of *our* pleasure in worshiping God.
- The Puritans, never accused of being trendy, talked a great deal about Christian happiness.
 - Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) wrote,
 - "I have neither tongue nor pen to express to you the happiness of such as are in Christ."
 - Baptist pastor Octavius Winslow (1808-1878) said,
 - "The child of God is, from necessity, a joyful man. His sins are forgiven, his soul is justified, his person is adopted, his trials are blessings, his conflicts are victories, his death is immortality, his future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought-of, untold, and endless blessedness *joyful* man?"[\[12\]](#)
- Who could possibly have more reason to rejoice than one who knows Jesus?

SCRIPTURE'S GOOD NEWS IS OF "GREAT JOY," NOT "GREAT DUTY."

- When the gospel is viewed primarily as laying burdens and obligations on people, the Good News gets buried.
- Burdens and obligations are not good news; good news is about liberation, deliverance, newfound delight, and daily celebration.
- Duty is real and the gospel calls us to a life of obedience, but it's *glad* duty and *joyful* obedience.
- There's an age-old tradition of Christ-followers who have found their deepest happiness in their Lord.
- We should eagerly join them and say with English Puritan John Flavel (1627-1691),
 - "Christ [is] the very essence of all delights and pleasures, the very soul and substance of them. As all the rivers are gathered into the ocean . . . so Christ is that ocean in which all true delights and pleasures meet."