



GOD'S PROMISE OF
HAPPINESS



RANDY
ALCORN

Bestselling Author of *Heaven*



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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	The Happiness God Offers	<i>ix</i>
CHAPTER 1	Our Universal Search for Happiness	<i>1</i>
CHAPTER 2	God, Jesus, and Happiness	<i>25</i>
CHAPTER 3	The Happiness-Killers	<i>43</i>
CHAPTER 4	Looking for Happiness in All the Right Places	<i>53</i>
CHAPTER 5	Good News of Happiness Today, Tomorrow, and Forever	<i>67</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	Happiness Is the Proper Response to Good News	<i>81</i>
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>87</i>
	<i>About the Author</i>	<i>91</i>

THE HAPPINESS GOD OFFERS

My dear brothers and sisters, if anybody in the world ought to be happy, we are the people. . . . How boundless our privileges! How brilliant our hopes!

CHARLES SPURGEON



Do we seek happiness because we're sinners or because we're human? Should faith in God be dragged forward by duty or propelled by delight? Must we choose between holiness and happiness?

Much of my time with my wife, Nanci, and our family and friends is filled with fun and laughter. The God we love is the enemy of sin *and* the creator of pleasure and humor. (True, God's gifts of art, movies, books, sports, work, food, drink, sex, and money can all be used selfishly and sinfully. In a fallen world, what *can't* be?)

I was an empty, unhappy teenager when I first heard the Good News about Jesus. Soon I put

my trust in him and experienced a deep, heartfelt happiness unlike anything I'd ever known. Nevertheless, there's a paradigm-shifting doctrine I was never taught in church, Bible college, or seminary: the happiness of God. Scripture says about Christ, "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6). If Jesus walked around mostly miserable, it makes sense that we would. But if he was happy, shouldn't we be happy too?

Christians throughout church history understood that happiness, gladness, feasting, and partying are God's gifts, yet many Christians today live as if faith drains happiness! Life isn't easy, of course, but believers have the benefit of walking the hard roads hand in hand with a Savior and King whose love for us is immeasurable. Who has more reason to be happy than we do?

There are a lot of promises in this booklet—most of them are God's, not mine. All his promises are fully trustworthy. Why? Because they're blood-bought, paid for by an all-powerful Lord who loves you radically.

Ask your Creator to speak to you, especially as

you contemplate the Scripture I've included. May you find greater happiness in God than you've ever known—beginning now and never ending.

The people ransomed by the LORD . . . will come to Zion singing with joy. Everlasting happiness will be on their heads as a crown. They will be glad and joyful. They will have no sorrow or grief.

ISAIAH 35:10, GW

Randy Alcorn

FALL 2015

OUR UNIVERSAL SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS



DO WE HAVE A CHOICE WHETHER OR NOT TO DESIRE HAPPINESS?

Augustine wrote in the fifth century, “Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy.”¹

Nearly 1,300 years later, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. . . . The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”²

Puritan Thomas Manton said, “It is as natural for the reasonable creature to desire to be happy, as it is for the fire to burn.”³ J. C. Ryle said, “All men naturally hunger and thirst after happiness.”⁴

If we don’t understand what these wise people

knew, we'll imagine people have a choice whether or not to pursue happiness. *We don't*. Happiness-seeking is built into every person, of every age and circumstance.

I believe we inherited from our Eden-dwelling ancestors a sense of their pre-Fall happiness. Our hearts refuse to settle for sin, suffering, boredom, and purposelessness—we long for something better. Were we merely the product of natural selection and survival of the fittest, we'd have no grounds for believing any ancient happiness existed. But we are all nostalgic for an Eden we've only seen fleeting hints of.

Unfortunately, for countless Christians, being happy yields an uneasy guilt. Being holy is something we can do in God's presence, but being happy is something we're more comfortable doing behind his back (which isn't possible). But God's children are told to be happy "before the LORD":

- You shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and your daughters. (Deuteronomy 12:12)

- May all those who seek you be happy and rejoice in you! (Psalm 40:16, NET)

IS IT OKAY FOR CHRISTIANS TO BE HAPPY?

Shout triumphantly to the LORD, all the earth! Be happy! Rejoice out loud!

PSALM 98:4, CEB

It's not just okay to be happy; it's *right* to be happy. The Bible clearly *tells* God's children to be happy. Jesus commanded his disciples to be happy, and for a compelling reason: "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). If we're not experiencing happiness in God, then we're disobeying and missing the abundant life Jesus came to give (see John 10:10).

We shouldn't criticize people for wanting to be happy. Pastors who encourage people to stop seeking happiness or parents who don't want their children motivated by happiness are fighting a losing battle. They'll never succeed, and they'll do damage by distancing the gospel from the happiness everyone craves.

Consistently seeking our happiness in Jesus shouts to everyone that God is present and working in the world and that he'll one day reign over a new universe. As A. W. Tozer said, "The people of God ought to be the happiest people in all the wide world!"⁵

- Be happy and shout to God who makes us strong! (Psalm 81:1, CEV)
- Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! (Philippians 4:4, NLT)

DOES THE BIBLE HAVE MUCH TO SAY ABOUT HAPPINESS?

There are more than 2,700 passages in the Bible containing words such as *joy, happiness, gladness, merriment, pleasure, cheer, laughter, delight, jubilation, feasting, exultation, and celebration.*

God makes it clear that seeking happiness through sin is wrong and fruitless. But seeking happiness in him is good and right:

- Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD! (Deuteronomy 33:29)

- Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:12, CEV)

Many passages don't contain the word *happiness*, but the concept is unmistakable:

- May Yahweh bless you and protect you; may Yahweh make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; may Yahweh look with favor on you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26, HCSB)
- All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. (Proverbs 15:15)
- Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. (Ecclesiastes 9:9)

DOESN'T THE BIBLE TALK ABOUT JOY RATHER THAN HAPPINESS?

An ungrounded separation of joy from happiness has infiltrated the Christian community. Among English speakers, the word *happiness* has been a bridge between the church and the world, until recently. It's a bridge we can't afford to burn. *Joy* is

a perfectly good word. But there are other equally good words that Bible translators use to convey happiness, including *gladness*, *merriment*, *delight*, and *pleasure*.

Happiness and joy are synonyms. They're much more alike than unlike. *Joy*, in Merriam-Webster's dictionary, is defined as "a feeling of great happiness" and "a source or cause of great happiness."⁶

Similarly, look in Hebrew and Greek lexicons at the many different words translated *joyful*, *glad*, *merry*, and *delighted*. In nearly every case, you'll find these words defined as meaning "happy."

Think of expressions using the word joy:

- "He jumped for joy."
- "She's our pride and joy."
- "I wept for joy."

In each case, isn't joy synonymous with happiness?

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.”⁷

- You, O LORD, have made me *happy* by your work. I will sing for *joy* because of what you have done. (Psalm 92:4, NET)
- God, you have caused the nation to grow and made the people *happy*. And they have shown their *happiness* to you, like the *joy* during harvest time. (Isaiah 9:3, NCV)

ARE THERE BIG DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JOY AND HAPPINESS?

Until the twentieth century, *happiness* and *joy* were used interchangeably. Then some Christian leaders saw the word *happiness* used for sinful activities (e.g., people abandoning their families to “be happy”), so they started speaking against happiness-seeking.

Their concern was understandable, yet what they should have said was, “God built us to desire happiness, but we’re to seek happiness in him!”

Depicting joy in contrast with happiness has obscured the true meaning of both words. Aren’t

joyful people typically cheerful—smiling and laughing a lot? They're *happy*!

I agree with Joni Eareckson Tada:

We're often taught to be careful of the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness, it is said, is an emotion that depends upon what "happens." Joy by contrast, is supposed to be enduring, stemming deep from within our soul and which is not affected by the circumstances surrounding us. . . . I don't think God had any such hair-splitting in mind. Scripture uses the terms interchangeably along with words like delight, gladness, blessed. There is no scale of relative spiritual values applied to any of these.⁸

Here's a sampling of the more than one hundred Bible verses in various translations that use *joy* and *happiness* together with obviously parallel meanings:

- For the Jews it was a time of *happiness* and *joy*, gladness and honor. (Esther 8:16, NIV)

- Give your father and mother *joy*! May she who gave you birth be *happy*.
(Proverbs 23:25, NLT)
- The young women will rejoice with dancing, while young and old men rejoice together. I will turn their mourning into *joy* . . . and bring *happiness* out of grief.
(Jeremiah 31:13, HCSB)

WITH SO MANY DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS, HOW CAN WE BE SURE OF WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS ABOUT HAPPINESS?

The Bible was written almost entirely in Hebrew and Greek. Later, it was carefully translated into languages, including English, by teams of rigorously trained scholars. While they often use different words, the many English translations aren't nearly as different in meaning as is often supposed.

Consider Ecclesiastes 9:7. The New American Standard Bible reads, "Eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a *cheerful* heart." Other than using *your* instead of *thy*, the English Standard

Version reads the same as the King James Version: “Eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a *merry* heart.” The New International Version says, “Eat your food with *gladness*, and drink your wine with a *joyful* heart.”

Don't think these translations disagree on the meanings of the original Hebrew. They align very closely. Why? Because the two Hebrew words are synonyms, and each can be accurately rendered by any of the chosen English words—also synonyms.

The New Living Translation, the Complete Jewish Bible, and the New English Translation all agree on another rendering of the last part of Ecclesiastes 9:7: “Drink your wine with a *happy* heart” (emphasis added). *Happy* is a different word from *cheerful*, *merry*, or *joyful*, but it has the same essential meaning—hence, none of these translations contradicts the others.

Is only one translation right? No, because *exact* equivalents rarely exist between languages—and Hebrew into English is no exception. As long as the translations effectively capture the original's intent, all are correct, despite the different wording.

WHAT DOES *BLESSED* HAVE TO DO WITH BEING HAPPY?

Growing up in an unbelieving home, I never heard the word *blessed*. After coming to Christ and beginning to attend church, I heard it countless times. I didn't know its meaning; it just sounded holy and spiritual.

Years later, studying Greek in college, I heard someone say that *blessed* in the English Bible often really means "happy." My response was, "Huh?" Everyone knows it's good to be blessed, but it certainly didn't sound like happy to me!

The Hebrew word *asher* is used twenty-six times in the Psalms alone. When the Jewish people heard Psalm 1 read, they heard "*Happy* is the one who . . ."

Jesus used the Greek word *makarios* nine times in the Beatitudes, which meant to the original listeners, "*Happy* are the poor in spirit. . . . *Happy* are the meek. . . . *Happy* are the merciful. . . . *Happy* are the peacemakers," and so on (Matthew 5:3-12).

Young's Literal Translation, the Common English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, the Phillips New Testament, and the Good News Translation

all translate *makarios* as “happy” the great majority of the time. My extensive research and dialogue with Hebrew and Greek scholars and translators left me perplexed over why many translators continue to use the word *blessed* as a translation of *asher* and *makarios*. Four hundred years ago, when the King James Version was translated, *blessed* still meant “happy.” But to most people today, it means something quite different.

The fact is, some modern versions remain reluctant to change the translation of particularly familiar verses in the King James Version, and few are more familiar than the Beatitudes. Had the Bible never before been translated into English, would modern scholars even consider rendering *asher* or *makarios* as “blessed”? It’s hard to imagine they would.

- How happy [*asher*] is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the LORD’s instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2, HCSB)

- Happy [*makarios*] are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy [*makarios*] are people who grieve, because they will be made glad. Happy [*makarios*] are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:3-5, CEB)

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE GENUINELY HAPPY?

Both psychological research and Scripture demonstrate that those who give generously and serve others are happy people. Those waiting to be happy shouldn't hold their breath—it could be a long wait!

A 2010 survey of 4,500 American adults revealed that of those who volunteered an average of one hundred hours a year, 68 percent reported they were physically healthier, 73 percent said it “lowered my stress levels,” and 89 percent said it “has improved my sense of well-being.”⁹

God's gift of happiness for believers is more than simply recognizing that happiness comes from knowing, loving, and serving God. We must

do something: open God's Word; go to a Bible study; join a church; volunteer at a homeless shelter; write a check to support missions.

Our happiness was bought and paid for by Jesus. But it's ours only when we take hold of the gift God paid a tremendous price for!

- Happy is a man who finds wisdom and who acquires understanding. (Proverbs 3:13, HCSB)
- Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely. (Acts 2:46, CEV)

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE REALLY HAPPY?

Although the quest for happiness isn't new, people today seem particularly thirsty for it. Our culture is characterized by increased depression and anxiety, particularly among the young.¹⁰ Numerous Christians live in daily sadness, anger, anxiety, or loneliness, taken captive by their circumstances. They lose joy over traffic jams, long lines, or increased gas prices, missing the reasons

for happiness expressed on nearly every page of Scripture.

Research indicates there is “little correlation between the circumstances of people’s lives and how happy they are.”¹¹ Yet when people respond to the question “Why aren’t you happy?” they tend to focus on their current circumstances. Happy people look to Someone so big that by his grace, even great difficulties provide opportunities for a deeper kind of happiness.

Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

PSALM 37:3-4

IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BELIEVER’S AND AN UNBELIEVER’S HAPPINESS?

No and yes. The apostle Paul said to unbelievers that God “did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). So God extends his common grace to all people, bringing a certain amount

of happiness to everyone—enough to give a taste of what is so often missing.

When an atheist enjoys the cool breeze of a sunny autumn day as he writes his treatise saying God doesn't exist, the ultimate source of his pleasure remains God. God is the author of the universe itself—including the powers of rational thought the atheist misuses to argue against God.

David Murray identifies six kinds of happiness available to unbelievers and believers alike: social, natural, vocational, physical, intellectual, and humorous. The one remaining component, available only to believers, is spiritual happiness. Murray calls that unique happiness “a joy that at times contains more pleasure and delight than the other six put together.”¹²

A key to enjoying the Christian life is connecting the dots between our happiness and God's provision. When I run with my dog or look at Jupiter dominating the sky over Mount Hood, I experience happiness. Unbelievers are capable of enjoying happiness in the same things, but their happiness can't be as immense or enduring because they're disconnected from the Provider.

- You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:11, NKJV)
- How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. (Psalm 36:7-8, NIV)

WHY DOES HAPPINESS SEEM ELUSIVE?

For many people, happiness changes with the winds of circumstance. We can't count on such happiness tomorrow, much less forever.

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

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

The Bible is clear—this life is temporary, but

we *will* live forever somewhere, in a far better or far worse place. (For those who know Christ, this life is the closest we'll ever come to Hell; for those who don't know Christ, it's the closest they'll ever come to Heaven.)

Looking at life through the lens of Christ's redemptive work for us, reasons for happiness abound.

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

DEUTERONOMY 7:9

SHOULD WE EXPECT HAPPINESS TO COME EASILY AND TO ALWAYS LAST?

It's unrealistic to expect perpetual happiness while the Curse is in effect. But the day is coming when "there will no longer be any curse" (Revelation 22:3, HCSB). Believing this can front-load our eternal happiness to the lives we live today.

I'm not always happy, any more than I'm always

holy. But by God's grace, I'm happier in Christ now than I've ever been. And I've learned to make choices that increase my joy. Great pain certainly dulls—and at times overshadows—happiness, but it can't destroy what's grounded in our ever-faithful God.

Nanci and I give each other permission to experience sadness when we hear bad news. We don't pretend all is well. But knowing God's commands to rejoice in him through his all-sufficient power, we meditate on his Word and call on him to impart his gladness to us. In time God exchanges our natural responses with his supernatural, joy-giving presence. Sometimes sorrow and joy do battle; sometimes they coexist, but when our hearts and minds are on Christ, joy is never far away:

- You [LORD] changed my sorrow into dancing. You took away my clothes of sadness, and clothed me in happiness. (Psalm 30:11, NCV)
- [Jesus said,] “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In

the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”
(John 16:33)

IS GOD SERIOUS ABOUT OFFERING US HAPPINESS?

Jesus tells two stories about great parties thrown by God: the wedding feast (see Matthew 22:1-14) and the great banquet (see Luke 14:15-24). In both celebrations, the host (representing God) invites guests to join in.

People in that culture knew how to throw parties, and nothing was more festive than a wedding feast—lots of food, drinks, music, and laughter.

In the second story, when a good, happy king with vast wealth threw a party, those the king invited made all kinds of excuses. They refused the invitation. *They said no to happiness.* (If you're too busy for a great wedding feast and the King's banquet, you're too busy!)

These parables exemplify God's sincere invitation to happiness and our tendency to pursue other things we imagine will make us happier.

We couldn't be more wrong. Rejecting the

King's offer of endless celebration in his presence is rejecting happiness itself.

The moral of the story? When God invites you to a party, *say yes*. You'll be happy you did!

When the LORD brought us back to Jerusalem, it was like a dream! How we laughed, how we sang for joy! . . . Indeed he did great things for us; how happy we were!

PSALM 126:1-3, GNT

CAN LASTING HAPPINESS BE FOUND APART FROM GOD?

Oxford professor C. S. Lewis was an atheist and agnostic before believing in Christ. He said,

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no

other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way. . . . God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.¹³

Seeking happiness without God is like seeking water without wetness or sun without light. As fallen, rebellious creatures, while we still want happiness, we don't even *want* to want God. In spiritual darkness, we attribute our happiness to everything but God. But when we know Christ, we can cultivate our awareness of God as the Source of all happiness. Every flower, cup of coffee, meal, and song can stir within us gratitude and happiness.

Because of God's kindness, people can reject God but still receive the benefits of his common grace, including the enjoyment of loving relationships, natural and artistic beauty, and pleasure. However, beware: we live on borrowed time.

In the end, we have two choices:

1. *both* God and happiness
2. *neither* God nor happiness

What we can't have is God without happiness or eternal happiness without God.

- Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God. In the same manner Christ also was offered in sacrifice once to take away the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27-28, GNT)
- Nothing evil will be allowed to enter [Heaven] . . . but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. (Revelation 21:27, NLT)