

Does *The Case for
Biblical Happiness*

God Want
Us to Be
Happy?

RANDY ALCORN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HEAVEN*

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*The nonfiction imprint of
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*

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Does God Want Us to Be Happy?: The Case for Biblical Happiness

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The author is grateful for the helpful counsel of the literary agency, WTA Services LLC, Franklin, TN.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

ISBN 978-1-4964-3257-5 (hc)

Printed in China

25	24	23	22	21	20	19
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Contents

- 1 Does God Care about Our Happiness? 1
- 2 Is God Happy? 9
- 3 Who Was the Happiest Person in Human History? 19
- 4 What Are Some Christian Myths about Happiness? 31
- 5 Are Joy and Happiness at Odds with Each Other? 39
- 6 Does “Blessed” Mean “Happy”? 55
- 7 Where Does True Happiness Begin? 69
- 8 What Kills Our Happiness? 83
- 9 Is It Okay to Find Happiness in God’s Gifts? 95
- 10 What Key Unlocks Happiness? 109
- 11 Is Happiness for Now or Later . . . or Both? 121
- 12 Can We Be Happy Despite Suffering? 133
- 13 Will We Really Live Happily Ever After? 145

14 How Can Happiness Transform Us, Our Families,
and Our Churches? 157

Notes 169

About the Author 177

Scripture Sources and Permissions 179

CHAPTER 1

DOES GOD CARE ABOUT OUR HAPPINESS?

IF YOU WERE TO ASK a roomful of people what God wants us to do, you'd likely get a wide range of answers.

Some people would say he wants us to obey him or to be holy. Others might claim he wants us to love people and stand up for peace and justice. But chances are, you wouldn't hear anyone say, "God wants us to be happy."

Most of us have a complicated relationship with happiness. We all want to be happy, but we may feel guilty about this longing. Isn't it selfish to pursue happiness? Isn't it more spiritual to frown than to smile?

In a world full of brokenness, we may wonder if happiness is a worthy pursuit. If we are seeking to follow Jesus, should this quest be written off as superficial and unspiritual?

Maybe you've been taught over the years that God cares about your holiness, not your happiness. This implies we have to choose between the two.

We've also heard that God calls us to joy, not happiness. According to innumerable sermons and books and blog posts, there's a big difference between joy, which is spiritual, and happiness, which is unspiritual. But does the Bible actually say this? Does God care about our happiness?

The answer might surprise you. Yes, God *does* care about our happiness. And he has gone to great lengths to prove it.

We Are Wired for Happiness

If you asked any group of people what they want out of life, chances are that most, if not all, would give some form of the same answer: "To be happy."

This inborn longing for happiness has been observed for thousands of years by theologians, philosophers, atheists, and agnostics.

Augustine (354–430), perhaps the most influential theologian in church history, wrote 1,600 years ago, "Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy."¹

Nearly 1,300 years after Augustine, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception."²

Since then, countless others have observed the same.

Happiness Is Not Just a Secular Longing

Among Christ-followers, *happiness* was once a positive, desirable word.

Scottish churchman Thomas Boston (1676–1732) said, “Consider what man is. He is a creature that desires happiness, and cannot but desire it. The desire of happiness is woven into his nature, and cannot be eradicated. It is as natural for him to desire it as it is to breathe.”³

Evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770) said, “Is it the end of religion to make men happy, and is it not every one’s privilege to be as happy as he can?”⁴

Whitefield once asked an audience, “Does [Jesus] want your heart only for the same end as the devil does, to make you miserable? No, he only wants you to believe on him, that you might be saved. This, this, is all the dear Savior desires, to make you happy, that you may leave your sins, to sit down eternally with him.”⁵

Pastor Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) said to his London congregation almost 150 years ago, “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!”⁶

Boston, Whitefield, and Spurgeon are just three Christian leaders among many throughout church history who knew that happiness is one of God’s greatest gifts.

Let's be clear: we all know that happiness at the expense of others is wrong.

Is there selfish and superficial happiness? Sure. There's also selfish and superficial love, peace, loyalty, and trust. But we don't villainize these virtues just because they are sometimes misguided. Likewise, we shouldn't throw out Christ-centered and God-honoring happiness with the bathwater of self-centered happiness.

There's Good News about Happiness

If we want to be happy but God *doesn't* want us to be happy, wouldn't that be bad news?

The gospel is called the "good news of happiness" (Isaiah 52:7, *ESV, NASB*). Then why do Christians today often say things like "God wants you blessed, not happy"⁷ and "God doesn't want you to be happy. God wants you to be holy"?⁸

Any message that God doesn't want us to be happy undermines the "good news of happiness" Jesus came to bring us. Compelling biblical evidence and a long history of Christ-followers have affirmed that our God is pro-happiness.

What if a happy God made us for happiness, and therefore our desire to be happy is inseparable from our longing for God?

What if God wired his image bearers for happiness before sin entered the world?

What if wanting happiness isn't the problem, but looking for happiness in sin is?

What if our desire to be happy can be properly redirected to God and all that he wants for us?

How might this perspective on happiness change our approach to life, parenting, church, ministry, business, sports, entertainment, and everything else?

Since unhappy Christians make the gospel unattractive, wouldn't the gospel become contagiously appealing if Christians embraced happiness in Jesus?

A Good Father Delights in His Children's Happiness

How many of us have ever heard a sermon, read a book, had a discussion about, or meditated on God's happiness? In fact, we're often taught to do exactly the opposite—to squelch our longing for happiness (which will never work).

The resulting silence about or contradiction of biblical revelation about one of God's great attributes is an immense loss to individuals and families, as well as to the church as a whole.

The title of this book is ironic. If we were thinking correctly, we would naturally wonder, *Why would anyone even ask whether God wants his people to be happy?*

Some unbelievers might be perplexed by the question “Does God want us to be happy?” If they *did* believe in a good God, surely they’d suppose he would value his children’s happiness. *What good father wouldn’t?*

Have you ever met a loving, devoted human father who doesn’t want his children to be happy? Sure, he wouldn’t want them to sacrifice personal integrity or virtue. But he knows that not having those things will never make them happy anyway! He wants them to make good and right choices that result in their long-term happiness.

The question “Does God want us to be happy?” makes sense to many of us only because we have been indoctrinated to believe he doesn’t. That’s what I was taught after becoming a Christian as a teenager. Millions of others have been taught the same.

I’m delighted to say that the Bible itself, along with the beliefs of people throughout church history, have liberated me from this misconception.

There’s a Right Kind of Happiness

Many Christians live in daily sadness, anger, anxiety, or loneliness, thinking these feelings are inevitable, given their circumstances. Maybe you’re one of them. We can lose joy over traffic jams, a stolen credit card, or increased gas prices. We can read Scripture with blinders on, missing

the reasons for happiness expressed on nearly every page. But it doesn't have to be that way!

So let's explore this Christ-centered happiness further and see what God's Word and his people have to say about it.

My hope is that this book will open your eyes to the fact that the answer to "Does God want us to be happy?" is a resounding "Yes!" And my prayer is that you would thrive in this knowledge and unapologetically seek happiness in Jesus and in the wonders of his grace and his gifts.

