

TGC

HARD QUESTIONS



Why Is It So Hard to Be Happy?

Jen Oshman

“This book speaks with honesty and clarity to our restless pursuit of happiness. Compassionate and anchored in truth, it helps readers examine misplaced hopes and offers a vision of joy sturdy enough to endure suffering, disappointment, and the weight of everyday life.”

Darby Strickland, CCEF Faculty; author, *Is It Abuse?*

“Jen paints a bull’s-eye around one’s happiness in God, which is the only bull’s-eye that will bring fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. An important matter is her comparison of seven habits recommended by psychologists and, later, the biblical foundations, source, and telos for those habits. She thus notes parallel behaviors but pivotal differences between biblical teaching and psychology generally. This is what true science always does—confirm what God has been telling us all along. I’m glad Jen writes, and reading her work prompts me to double down on my joy in the happy God who is blessed forever. Amen!”

Sam Crabtree, Pastor for Small Groups, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota; author, *Practicing Affirmation*

“Our quest to soothe our unhappiness sends us in a thousand different directions that ultimately disappoint. In this short book, Jen Oshman helps us see why the pursuit of happiness in and of itself will never give us what we yearn for. If we chase the offerings of this life to grab hold of happiness, our hearts will always be empty. But if we spend our lives running after Jesus, joy will never let us go.”

Glenna Marshall, author, *Everyday Faithfulness*; *Memorizing Scripture*; and *Known and Loved*

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TGC Hard Questions

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Jen Oshman

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“WHAT IN THE WORLD? Where are we? Is this a joke?”

My husband and I were incredulous. We'd reached our destination, but it wasn't the bustling event center we'd expected. Instead, it was a yellowing field, barren except for the few cows who stood staring at us while chewing their cud, eyes accusing *us* of being the problem, not their field.

It was the early 2000s, and Mark and I were weary. We'd left our kids and demanding careers back home in Japan and had flown to the US to attend a conference that promised to quench our thirsty souls. An hour before arriving at the barren field, we'd paid extra for a GPS at the airport car rental kiosk. Mind you, this was before smartphones, so this device resembled a walkie-talkie and gave us directions only audibly. But we figured the newfangled technology would outperform the printed directions we'd shoved in our suitcase a continent and ocean ago. We were wrong.

We'd set out for a specific destination. We trusted the wisdom of the benevolent GPS. We listened carefully and proceeded exactly as the voice instructed. And we arrived precisely where it told us to go.

It was just the wrong place.

As it turned out, the limited data available to GPS in its early days meant that one address sometimes led to more than one location. We called the car rental company, they apologized, and they gave us new verbal instructions to get to our much-anticipated destination.

Classic, right?

No doubt something like this has happened to you too—literally or figuratively. You envisioned and anticipated a specific destination, you followed someone's wisdom (maybe your own) to get there, and when you arrived, it wasn't at all what you'd hoped for.

We just don't know what we don't know.

So it is with happiness. We desperately want to get there. We long for it, hunt for it, go to great lengths for it. If you've picked up a book on why happiness is so hard to find, you're likely having trouble arriving at your hoped-for happiness destination. You may feel like my husband and I did back in that field. *Really? This is it?* Just

as we called the car rental company for further instructions, you're flipping through these pages wondering if you missed a turn somewhere along the way.

We need a happiness GPS to tell us what we're aiming for. And we'd like it to be accurate!

Part 1: What Even Is Happiness?

All the major dictionaries say happiness is something like "the feeling or showing of pleasure or contentment." But if you look up *happy* in a thesaurus, you'll find at least a dozen strong synonyms, not to mention dozens of weaker ones that may fit the desired connotation. If you're happy, you may say you're cheerful, delighted, ecstatic, glad, joyous, upbeat, content, peaceful, satisfied, serene, or even tickled pink. So many possible ways to express one elusive notion.

Charles Schulz, creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip, wrote a book called *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy*, published in 1962. In this little book, Charlie Brown and his friends define happiness in simple ways. In one scene, Lucy says, "Happiness is a fuzzy sweater." In another, Snoopy says, "Happiness is walking in the grass in your bare feet." And in yet another, Linus claims, "Happiness

is an ‘A’ on your spelling test.”¹ No doubt each of these definitions made you smile, as they did me and, I’m sure, all of Schulz’s readers.

Is happiness *merely* the feeling or showing of pleasure or contentment? Is it simply feeling good? Can we be happy just by holding a warm puppy or wearing a fuzzy sweater?

If you’re going to search for happiness, how you define it matters. There’s a massive difference between momentary pleasure and lasting contentment, yet the dictionaries say happiness is feeling or showing one or the other. Whereas all people are pleasure seekers, the momentary buzzes we achieve fall short of the lasting contentment we’re really after.

It’s not just the temporary nature of pleasure that impedes our pursuit of permanent happiness. It’s also the self-focused nature of our pursuit. “Do what makes you happy,” we say—emphasis on *you*. Will the puppy make *me* happy, or the fuzzy sweater? What do *I* need to be happy?

If our life goal is to make ourselves happy—and we’ll see in our discussion of the history of happiness below that we humans have prioritized this for millennia—then the pursuit is, by nature, self-centered. This preoccupation

with self counterintuitively makes us miserable, because selfishness is sinful and sin makes us miserable. A self-focus may feel good for a time, but barring a seared conscience, we all know the bad taste of guilt after a particularly selfish act, season of self-absorption, or misdeed at another's expense.

I'll unpack this more later, but it's useful to acknowledge at the outset that sin plays a role here. Sin is any thought, word, or deed "in opposition to God's benevolent purposes for his creation. . . . [Sin] is the basic corrupting agent in the entire universe."² Sin plagues us all, and it particularly plagues our pursuit of happiness precisely because sin makes us *unhappy*, yet we willingly sin anyway, convinced that each new sin will somehow have a different result.

Why is it so hard to be happy? We will find the answer to that question as we investigate the history, sociology, and data on happiness in the pages ahead. But let's admit now that our pursuit of happiness tends to be self-focused, and let's push against that reality. And this self-centered nature of our pursuit surprisingly plays a central role in our falling short of genuine happiness time and time again.

So, let's begin our investigation. In this first part of the book, we'll look at the pursuit of happiness in history, and we'll take stock of how we seek happiness today. Then, in part 2, we'll look at data that says our current attempts at happiness largely fall short. We'll ponder why happiness is so elusive. And in part 3, we'll course-correct and explore a kind of happiness that withstands the tests of time and turbulence. Ultimately, we'll find we're looking for something (or Someone?) transcendent. Momentary pleasure wears off. But there's a way to be content in all of life's circumstances.

First, a look at history.

The Historical Quest for Happiness

Philosophers have been trying to get at the source of happiness for millennia. Ecclesiastes, possibly penned by King Solomon in the tenth century BC, offers a version of happiness as a gift of God: "There is nothing better for [people] than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man" (Eccl. 3:12–13). Aristotle is thought to have claimed, "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole

aim and end of human existence.”³ Around AD 400, after years of immoral and corrupt living, the early church father Augustine finally concluded that happiness cannot be found apart from God: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁴ In the 1600s in France, the renowned mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote,

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. 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.⁵

Happiness is “the motive of every action of every man.” Whew. Is Pascal right? Is the pull that powerful? Pascal makes a big statement, but I think he’s onto something. If I’m honest, I *do* hope to find happiness in everything, from my morning coffee, to my money, to my marriage.

For Americans, the pursuit of happiness was enshrined in our cultural DNA when Thomas Jefferson penned the