

Blessed

Psalm 1:1–3, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”

Question: How can I be happy?

Key Verses: Prov 16:21; Phil 3:1; 1 Thess 5:16

“I feel blessed.” That’s Christianese for “happy.” It’s one of those phrases like “have a nice day” that is pleasant, expected, and typically disingenuous. According to the unwritten etiquette of church, if you’re not “blessed” you have a lack of faith or some other moral deficiency. This is the kind of nonsense that is off-putting to those and the sidelines looking into the validity of Church. So let’s deal with it head-on. Does God want you to be happy? Before answering the question, we had better recognize that happiness is a foundational human quest. It is neither trivial nor narcissistic. Happiness is a need as great as food, sex, or sleep. Typically, people are so set on happiness that they determine their ethics by their happiness. If a particular action, habit, or relationship makes them happy that alone makes it morally acceptable. You’ve heard it: “As long as you are happy.”

Is happiness a valid measure of morality? Can we really (or should we really) determine truth by the emotional satisfaction it offers? We hear a lot of people applying happiness as their personal metric of morality. Yet no parent applies it to their children. Why? Because it can destroy them! To an eight-year-old boy, the epitome of happiness is jumping off the roof...on a skateboard...into the pool. Not ok. Toddlers are fascinated with electrical outlets and power tools. Not ok. Every parent knows moments of happiness can breed decades of regret. Yet we keep hearing this: As long as you’re happy. Sheryl Crow memorialized the sentiment in her lyrics: “If it makes you happy, it can’t be that bad...” When we download her song into our Christian hymnals it sounds like this: God wants me happy. Does he? Does God really want you happy?

Before I give you my answer, let me share with you my experience as a Pastor. One hundred percent of the time in ministry when someone has used this line, “God wants me happy,” they are about to make a tragic mistake, usually in the context of marriage. We eavesdrop on a husband explaining his actions to his wife: “God wants me happy. YOU don’t make me happy. That woman at the office makes me happy!” In this scenario, does God want you happy? No! On the other hand, when someone says, “God must *not* want me happy” (usually as a response to some difficult situation), we should respond: “Of course God wants you happy! Now get up, go out, and do something about it!” Here is the paradox of happiness

in theological context: Those who claim God wants them happy are usually wrong and those who claim God doesn't want them happy are equally mistaken.

Does God want you happy? Of course he does! He's a good father. What father doesn't want his kids to be happy? Perhaps you've heard the same sermons I have where a confident preacher asserts: "God doesn't want you to be happy, he wants you to be holy!" On the surface that really sings. However, it contains a subtle, yet fatal flaw. This assumes happiness and holiness are on opposite sides of the fence. They are not. Holiness leads to happiness.

The Bible hasn't been particularly timid on the topic: "Delight yourself in the Lord" (Psalm 37:4). "Rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 3:1). "Rejoice always" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). "Do your acts of mercy with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:8). "We consider blessed those who remain steadfast" (James 5:11). The entire book of Ecclesiastes is an expose on happiness (Eccl. 2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 9:9) and Proverbs is a handbook of sorts (3:13, 18; 14:21; 16:20; 28:14; 29:18). So it can be misleading at best to say God desires your obedience more than your happiness, because obedience to these commands is happiness. It is interesting to note that only about half of the "happiness verses" speak on how to be happy but they all equate happiness with obeying the Lord in some way.

There is one passage that towers above the rest in happiness. But before God gave us the word, he gave us the world. So let's look at science first and then this scripture on happiness. We were genetically designed for happiness. If you see a Ferrari blow by you on the freeway, as you hear the engine roar, you just know, whoever designed that machine wanted it to go fast. Likewise, if you lift the hood on your cerebellum and look at the engine between your ears, you will realize you were designed for happiness.

Science of Happiness

When God constructed your brain he lubricated the synapses with three specific chemicals of happiness. (1) Oxytocin is the chemical that gives a sense of comfort. It is released through a handshake, a pat on the back, a warm hug. It is highly effective for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. (2) Dopamine is the chemical of adventure. It is released when your mind is buzzing with activity, discovery, and creative energy. When you invent a new product, create a song, solve a problem, or learn a new concept you get a dopamine drip. It drives productivity, travel, and adventure. (3) Serotonin is the chemical of respect. It is released when someone asks your opinion, calls you "sir", applauds your performance, or stands at attention. These are the happy juices of your cerebellum.

This chemical engine in your brain feeds your soul satisfaction leading to happiness. Now, there are several things each of us should understand about ourselves. First, these chemicals are highly addictive. That may sound negative but it is not. God gave these insatiable cravings for a reason—he craves your happiness. His design drives you toward it. Second, these chemicals are short-lived. You get a little squirt at a time that dissipates quickly. Hence, God did not architect you for long-term happiness but brief moments that require perpetual repetition.

Why? Because happiness is dependent on persistent habits that release the repetitive mini-bursts of chemicals. As a result, God's design leads to long-term habits that build positive communities. It's an ingenious design. Third, happiness is a chemical cocktail that you can control. This deserves a bit of explanation.

Aside from these three chemicals, there are three sources of happiness for every human being. Genetics, circumstances, and choices. Which of these three do you think accounts for the greatest percent of our happiness? According to substantial scientific research, genetics accounts for about half of our happiness. Some people are naturally perky. They are optimists by nature. Others are more pessimistic (or realistic if you ask them). In other words, all of us have a "set point" for happiness. For some the baseline is a bit higher and for some it is a bit lower but *all of us have a biological propensity to happiness* at some level. The second leading factor of happiness is the choices we make. These fall under categories like healthy eating, leisure, cultivating positive relationships, and getting enough sleep. These choices are statistically *huge* accounting for forty percent of our happiness! You can't control your genetics any more than you can control your circumstances but you can control your choices accounting for nearly half of your overall well-being. To put this in perspective, if you could control 40% of the stock market you would be stupid rich. Circumstances are another factor, weighing in at a measly ten percent. Most of us look for a change in circumstances to bring happiness but it is a fractional part of the equation. What's more is that the highs and lows of circumstances are not long-lasting. On average, any given circumstance only affects happiness for ninety days. Honeymoons last for about ninety days. Loss can be crippling but only for about ninety days. In one fascinating study, the researchers measured the level of happiness differentiated between those who won the lottery and those who lost their legs. Paraplegics obviously got depressed after the accident and lottery winners were euphoric. This study, however, did not examine the immediate affects but the level of happiness after one year. Surprisingly, lottery winners and paraplegics have virtually no difference in happiness levels from their set point after a year's time. People are apparently not happy or sad because of what has happened to them but due to choices they make. With that in mind, what does the Bible have to say about happiness?

Scripture on Happiness

Given what we know about the science of happiness, Psalm One is a brilliant exposition on how to be truly happy. While there are hundreds of verses that address happiness, this one is a particularly powerful place to start. First of all, Psalm One is the gateway into the worship of the Bible—a critical discipline for a happy life. The ability to positively connect with God is a foundation for our human relationships. In other words, the vertical relationship with God augments the horizontal relationships with others and visa-versa. Perhaps that's why the book of worship (Psalms) begins with this exposition on our relationships. Second, the arch above this gateway into worship is the bible's key word for happiness, "blessed." Psalm 1:1 "Blessed

is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.” If your ambition is the blessed life, Psalm One is ground zero.

It is relationships, not circumstances, that build happiness. When we build godly friendships our happiness increases. This is the source of our **oxytocin**. What your friends do, think, and say will shape your future happiness. They will also determine the depth of your worship. Above all, choose companions that lead you toward worship. That’s step one.

Step two is to increase dopamine, the discovery chemical. Verse 2 attends to that: “...but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.” While there are many ways to achieve dopamine, meditation is up toward the top. Meditation has been the focus of much of the research on happiness. Not just from Eastern mysticism but even from a Christian perspective. Caroline Leaf, a Neuro-science, reveals how you can literally build new synapses in your brain. Because your thoughts are made up of proteins in the synapses, they literally take up real estate in your brain. The more you meditate on a positive thought, the larger it grows. As you do, you release the addictive **dopamine** that determines happiness.

Step three is **serotonin**, the chemical of significance. Being helpful is the key to releasing serotonin. As we serve others, we gain significance. Verse 3 says it this way, “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.” When we are fruitful we find significance. The cool thing is that our brain cannot differentiate between significance to a president or a pauper. Consequently, we don’t have to climb the corporate ladder or win an Olympic event to be drenched in serotonin. Simple acts of kindness to people around us will be just as effective at giving you the chemical rush of happiness.

Psalm 1, written a thousand years before Jesus was born, gave a clear three-step process to developing the blessed life. (1) Build relationships with people who honor the Lord. (2) Create space in your brain for truths of God’s word. (3) Serve others in fruitful ways. It’s that simple and that effective. Furthermore, because these chemicals come in micro-bursts, it doesn’t take a herculean effort to release them. The small things you do today can achieve happiness. A simple letter of gratitude, a text to a lover, five minutes of quiet meditation, a random act of kindness can release chemicals of happiness in your brain. The secret to happiness is in micro moments that turn into perpetual habits. The simple choices you make today can cause mini-bursts of happiness. Stack enough of those together and they become habits. Habits, protracted into longevity becomes a biography.

Key Points:

- Your happiness is a chemical cocktail you can control by practicing habits that release oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin.
- While genetics accounts for 50% of our level of happiness, experiences only account for 10%, leaving a whopping 40% of our happiness to the choices we make.

- Psalm One, the window to worship in the Bible, opens with wise counsel about the choices we can make that will lead to happiness.

Action Step: Plan five minutes today to deliberately practice one simple action listed in Psalm 1 to release a shot of happiness.

Further Resource: Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Basic Books: 2006).