

What Does The Bible Say About Happiness?

By Owen Strachan

“Don’t worry, be happy.” —Bobby McFerrin¹

I remember hearing the above-quoted upbeat song when I was a seven-year-old in New England. The gentle reggae drew me in, and the words seemed right enough. And I wasn’t the only one who noticed McFerrin’s pop song.² It became a cultural meme. It was the first a cappella song to hit number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 charts, and it no doubt lent wind to a thousand collegiate a cappella groups.

It wasn’t only the song’s style but its content that listeners connected to. Humanity is hardwired to pursue happiness. We’re always looking for it, whether we know we are or not. We don’t have to be told to seek joy and pleasure. There is no toddler training course on the subject. We weren’t each sat down in an Orwellian Happiness Education Center at the age of two or three and made to watch videos dogmatically instructing us to get happy as soon as possible. We aren’t given Happiness Accountability Bracelets that zap us if we aren’t happy.³

We just naturally, instinctively, pre-cognitively want to be happy. So we pursue happiness, just as we always have.

If It Feels Good, Do It

This pursuit has taken shape in different places according to different proclivities. The Greek philosophical camp known as the Epicureans, for example, advocated that pleasure is the highest good in life. Led by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE), this school sought both tranquility and the absence of physical pain.⁴ Though Epicurus urged the goodness of moderating one’s quest for pleasure, many who have historically gravitated to the “Epicurean” philosophy have adopted a hedonistic way of life. They have moved away from a restrained, ethical lifestyle and embraced the natural instincts and appetites that seem to promise happiness.

If that sounds technical, it doesn’t need to. The hedonistic creed is basically this: if it feels good, do it. Like a doctor badgering a patient to fill a prescription, many influential voices over the centuries have urged this attitude. The Roman emperor Domitian, for example, hung a painting that personified death in his home to remind guests of the need to live pleasurably while there was still time.⁵

This philosophy persisted over the ages. In the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment philosopher La Mettrie concurred: “Nature created us all solely to be happy,” and left us to find happiness as we see fit.⁶ In the late nineteenth century, the talented writer and libertine Oscar Wilde voiced the same perspective. In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde’s character Lord Goring argues that “Pleasure is the only thing to live for. Nothing ages like happiness.”⁷ Wilde sharpened the point in *A Woman of No Importance*, speaking through the character of Lord Illington: “Moderation is a fatal thing, Lady Hunstanton. Nothing succeeds like excess.”⁸ Here is hedonism in bite-sized form: you deserve to be happy, so you should do what you want to do.

Pop Culture and Happiness

One need not command a world empire or write classic literature to serve as a spokesperson of hedonism. Skipping ahead a century or two, we can find many prominent cultural voices that champion the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure in our own day.

On pop radio stations, for example, you hear singers celebrating extreme pleasure-seeking in songs like Ke\$ha’s “Die Young”⁹:

¹ Bobby McFerrin, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*, Manhattan Records, 1988.

² The song became so big that it inspired a “lavishly illustrated” book by McFerrin. Bobby McFerrin, *Don’t Worry, Be Happy* (New York: Delacorte, 1989).

³ This is a reference to George Orwell’s novel *1984* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

⁴ For more on Epicurus, see Richard W. Hibler, *Happiness Through Tranquillity: The School of Epicurus* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

⁵ See Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 4, (1831; republished GraceWorks Multimedia, 2011), entry for Isa. 22:13.

⁶ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *La Mettrie: Machine Man and Other Writings*, ed. Ann Thompson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1893; republished London: Methuen and Co., 1912), accessible at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/885/885-h/885-h.htm>.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, (1893; republished Project Gutenberg, 1997), accessible at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/854/pg854.html>.

⁹ Ke\$ha, “Die Young” Warrior, RCA Records, 2012. The song peaked at no. 2 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.

Young hearts, out our minds
Running till we outta time
Wildchilds looking good
Living hard just like we should
Don't care whose watching when we tearing it up
That magic that we got nobody can touch.
We're looking for some trouble tonight.
Take my hand, I'll show you the wild side
Like it's the last night of our life. . . .
So while you're here in my arms,
Let's make the most of the night
Like we're gonna die young.

Filling in the gaps a bit, the essential worldview here is this:

- We're all just matter.
- We're not ethically accountable for anything.
- Plus, we're all going to die, and we may very well die young.
- So let's live it up, with a special focus on sexual and bodily pleasure.¹⁰

There's much to chew on here—despite the breezy tone and pounding beat designed to help us zone out from our cares and zero in on our lusts. Your average pop song may not seem philosophical but, in fact, it very often is—at least in the sense that it reveals what current culture values and encourages. This is true even for Ke\$ha. In “Die Young,” no higher authority exists or rules over human existence. No soul is spoken of, and so impending death has no lasting significance for Ke\$ha's listeners. In fact, because death is an established reality, one can even live in such a way as to potentially hasten its coming. In brute physiological terms, this may well happen given a lifestyle of partying, general neglect of stable life patterns, and unrestrained sexual appetite.

The Question of Sex: Why So Central to Happiness?

This last part of Ke\$ha's basic worldview is curious. Why connect dying young to sexual and bodily gratification? Why didn't Ke\$ha—and countless other artists—write a song connecting her mortality to, say, reading a great work of fiction by a quiet stream in a wooded glen? Couldn't the pop singer have urged her listeners to take up the simple joys of woodcraft, or hop-scotch, or tennis, or stamp-collecting? (That, by the way, is a pop song I want to hear: “Stamp Collecting ‘Til We Die.”)

There's something innate in many of us that drives us to love sex. The pursuit of hedonism, with considerable attention devoted to the lusts of the body, is certainly one of the most common ways of life known to humanity. This is not to say that everyone lives like a stereotypical rock star. Most do not. But many of us feel the pull to an ethically unaccountable, anything-goes way of life in which we gratify the desires of our flesh. This, we are told by many cultural leaders, is happiness. This, we are told, is not just happiness, but *life itself*. To be unfettered, doing whatever we want, having sex without limit or inhibition—this is what it means to truly live.

It is almost impossible to overestimate today just how pervasive this argument is in many cultures.

Your Best Self Now: Happiness Through Moral Improvement

To be sure, not everyone is hedonically drawn to sex. There are entire cultures, philosophies, and religions that do not celebrate sex as the modern West does; in a few, renunciation of sex is actually a catalyst to happiness. Even within the West today, there is a movement toward a quieter, simpler way of life. Gretchen Rubin's book *The Happiness Project* seeks, essentially, to help us embrace a quieter, more authentic life. Here's what Rubin says about her daily, task-by-task pursuit of happiness:

Some things that I've worked to stop doing—not that I've succeeded, but I've made some progress: gossiping,

¹⁰ For a critique of this worldview as expressed in academic terms, see James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 68–76.

eating fake food (i.e., “food” that comes in crinkly packages from corner delis), nagging, drinking alcohol (I had to face the fact that drinking the tiniest bit of alcohol makes me incredibly belligerent), losing my temper, staying up too late, not flossing, not doing enough to help other people, leaving my clothes strewn around—well, the list goes on and on.¹¹

Rubin’s version of the pleasant life is altogether different than Ke\$ha’s. This is not raw bodily hedonism; this is happiness-by-self-improvement. The central idea here is that stripping away negative habits from one’s life will lead to greater happiness. Instead of doubling down on her raw instincts—gossiping, eating gross food, and so on—as Ke\$ha does, Rubin seeks to cut them off. This is part [positive thinking](#), part personal therapy, and part moralism.

Both of these approaches fit within the broadly Epicurean worldview; they represent—nearly 2,500 years after Epicurus first opened his mouth—different poles of the happiness-driven life. These worldviews—appetite-gratifying hedonism and self-cleansing improvement—continue to draw many adherents in our day.

Perhaps they speak to you.

“True North”

These worldviews are radically different but share a common goal: to be surpassingly, unendingly happy. We all have different temperaments; we come from different backgrounds; we bear different scars. Most every one of us, however, searches for pervasive joy. From our own perspective, we are like the English writer C. S. Lewis, who would periodically feel a desire to go to a fictional land he called “True North,” a place better than any he knew.¹² No one had told Lewis he should want to go there; he had an instinctive pull to this mysterious reservoir of pure delight and unfading happiness.

Whether we seek this feeling through the pounding bass of a 100,000-person dance party, a romantic relationship, a good book, or community service, we must not forget this: We are all pursuing the same thing. We all want true, unfading happiness.

There is a tension in most of us, however, when it comes to happiness—somewhere between Ke\$ha and Rubin. We want uninterrupted joy, yes. But we also feel this odd, hard-to-explain pull toward morality, justice, and even [love](#) to others. In fact, we actually find ourselves feeling happy when we act rightly, when we serve others.

Of course, we won’t naturally give ourselves to unlimited morality. Most of us find ourselves in the middle, living in tension. We sometimes gratify our lusts, and that feels good (for a time). We sometimes try to improve ourselves and help others, and that feels good (until we get bored and want to play). Why are so many of us a strange mix of these two instincts?

The Inventor of Happiness

We are made to be transcendently happy both by enjoying the gifts of the body and by pursuing personal and social transformation. This is the twist: Happiness is not one or the other. It’s both.

Christians believe that [God](#)—the one who created all things and rules all things—planned this strange and ironic reality. It’s peculiar; it may go against much of what you’ve been told; but Christians believe it’s gloriously true. God wants you to be happy.

Maybe you’re skeptical at this point. You’ve had some acquaintance with Christian teachings, perhaps, and you’re thinking, *This isn’t right. I learned this stuff years ago, and the Christian dude I knew said that pleasure is bad, only holiness is good.*

Well, dear thinker-in-italic-fonts, I’ve got news for you: I’m going the opposite way. I think pleasure, contrary to what you may have heard, is good. Incredibly good. Let me push further: I believe that God—not *Playboy* or Kanye or Epicurus—made pleasure. And here’s the real kicker: he made it because he actually wants us to be happy.¹³

You read me right. God doesn’t want us shivering in the corner, frightened but obedient. He wants to unleash happiness in our lives, pour it into every aspect of our beings, flood our days with joy the world can’t touch or take away. This is the God

¹¹ Gretchen Rubin, “It’s Friday: think about YOUR Happiness Project. What’s making you feel bad?” *The Happiness Project* website, November 2, 2007, available at http://www.happiness-project.com/happiness_project/2007/11/its-friday-thin/. Also see Rubin, *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun* (New York: Harper, 2011).

¹² For a very helpful and inspiring discussion of Lewis’s longing for a better world (a longing which led him to Christian faith), see Alister McGrath, C. S. Lewis: *A Life* (Ada, MI: Bethany House, 2013), 131–59. If you have ever longed for something greater than

you have and felt hard-to-explain stirrings for a mysterious joy, this material will prove insightful.¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband* (1893; republished London: Methuen and Co., 1912), accessible at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/885/885-h/885-h.htm>.

¹³ For a readable but longer treatment of how Christianity is pro-pleasure, see Owen Strachan and Douglas Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards on the Good Life* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2010), a book that is part of a broader set called the *Essential Edwards Collection*.

of the [Bible](#). Forget what you've heard: he's a joyful God himself, and he loves nothing more than to make those of us who are chasing worldly happiness truly, deeply joyful.

But How Exactly Do We Find Happiness?

Here's the mystery at the heart of biblical Christianity: You become happy *through* [holiness](#).

The state of the world was not always as it is now. According to the biblical story of creation, humans originally existed in close relationship with God, in a world free of [pain and suffering](#). However, Adam and Eve fell prey to temptation and chose to disobey God deliberately. As a result, original sin was introduced to the world. Every human being was corrupted and made sinful by [Adam's sin](#).¹⁴ We naturally incline toward sin, which leads us to eternal destruction outside of the mercy of God.¹⁵ It also means that our instincts, appetites, and thirst for pleasure are disordered. We worship things that are not God, who alone deserves worship. We idolize sex, or money, or discipline, or even happiness itself.

But the Bible has good news for sinners; it shows us the path to joy. The way to become happy is presented simply in Scripture: obedience to God is pleasure. Faith in Christ is joy. The psalmist says to God with evident delight: "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."¹⁶

Following the Lord does not mean that life becomes some sort of spiritual vapor-experience, where you float two inches off the ground if you're living obediently—and only one inch if you're not praying enough. God, we learn here, is the author of pleasure. He's the super-intelligent being who first created it. From this perspective, the reason we can't genetically trace the cause of happiness is because it comes from higher origins.

God is infinitely happy himself. In the Christian view, the Father, Son, and Spirit share perfect and unbroken fellowship. Because they are divine, they delight in one another. The Holy [Trinity](#) is, according to theologian Jonathan Edwards, a "happy society of persons."¹⁷

A Busted Water Fountain

Why does this matter for you and me? Because when we become Christians, we get to taste the happiness that flows like a rushing river from the Trinity.

It's as if all our lives we've been drinking from a rusty fountain on a hot summer day. You know the fountain I mean—it's the kind that sometimes shoots a huge, unwanted stream of water into your nose but more often yields a trickle so small you have to put your whole mouth around the spigot just to get a sip. [Knowing God](#) as your Savior is vastly different. Instead of pounding a decrepit fountain for pleasure, we dive into a crystal-clear stream of delight. The river never ebbs, and we never grow tired of it.

But how exactly does this "becoming happy in God" thing happen? The Bible answers this question directly. "I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches," writes the psalmist.¹⁸ "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long."¹⁹ These texts show us that we grow happy in God through his Word. Obedience to God is what makes us happy. Living according to his wisdom is what brings us delight. Pursuing justice and living generously is what grants us liberation.

Does this mean that we simply sign a "God worshipper" card and then set out to do whatever good works we can find? Is that how we become happy and holy? Scripture answers this important question as well. In Hebrews 12:1-2, we find the source of both our happiness and our holiness:

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.²⁰

These two verses are loaded with significance in regard to our pursuit of happiness. They show us several things. First, it's not only OK but *right* to seek after joy. Jesus did. That's why he went to the cross. Second, joy is defined here (and elsewhere) not in terms of being free to do whatever we want, but in terms of obeying God's perfect will. The act of

¹⁴ See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Romans 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Psalm 14:3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Psalm 16:11.

¹⁷ Gerald McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2005).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Psalm 119:14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Psalm 119:97.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Hebrews 12:1-2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, John 15:11.

crucifixion in itself brought Jesus no joy; the act of obedience to the Father's will brought Jesus infinite joy.²¹ Third, Jesus is not only our example as a joy-seeker, but the means by which we may know the Lord and taste the pleasures of obedience.²²

Christ is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith," a phrase that means that his death and [resurrection](#) are our salvation. We are saved by trusting in his death in our place and on our behalf, and in his resurrection, which gives us life and victory over death, sin, and Satan. The work of Christ, then, is the engine of our obedience. Without repentant faith in it, we can't please God or [follow him](#).

Holy Happiness Through the Cross

So here is the astounding news: God calls us to be holy, blesses us with happiness *through* holiness, and gives us all the strength we need to be holy. Happy holiness—or holy happiness—is available through the cross.

This way of life allows us to enjoy the world as it is. We recognize that God has fashioned the world for his glory and our happiness. The gift of physical enjoyment and pleasure comes from him, not some leering studio executive. The ability to change our habits and become holistically healthier stems from the wisdom of the Almighty God, not a self-improvement program that we will almost surely abandon at some point. In discovering God and his goodness, we find a way to rightly, healthily enjoy the pleasures of this world.

Our appetites and hunger for pleasure are not bad. They are God-given instincts. But they must also be God-directed and God-ordered. In other words, the good news of Christ reorders our world and allows us to be happiest in the things that are the best for us and most worthy of our attention. Instead of worshipping the body, we worship God and God alone. Instead of deifying a social cause, we recognize the Lord as the only reality worth living for. In place of a generic pursuit of happiness above all things, we pursue Jesus Christ—and find impeccable joy in him.

Every Other Quest for Happiness Fails

There are myriad ways in which humanity searches for happiness. Two of the most common, however, are hedonism and self-improvement. You find these pursuits in different names, but many of us are drawn either to the gratification of our lusts or the moralistic repression of those lusts. Neither approach to life leaves us lastingly happy.

Those drawn to a celebrity's lifestyle of uncontrolled excess need only look at the latest headline to see that the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure does not fulfill us. It destroys us. The quieter path doesn't yield as many page views, but it can leave the soul shrunken. We go looking for happiness and find not the transcendent God who made us and rules us, but ourselves. Both of these approaches to happiness will no doubt feel good at certain times. But neither satisfies eternally.

Christians believe that this is because we are made for something greater. We are made to lose ourselves in a majestic, soul-saving, world-remaking God. That instinct in us that so many of us feel—what C. S. Lewis called the desire for True North—is given to us to point us to human insufficiency. We want and need something greater, something pure, a force that simultaneously ruins us and restores us. This is God and God alone. He is the cause of true happiness, and he is happiness itself.

Conclusion

With all this said, we must know that in following the Lord in faith, we are not signing up for an easy or pain-free life. Jesus' hunger for joy led him not to an air-conditioned throne but to a bloody cross. None of us knows what the Lord will lead us to do in this life. We do know, however, that if joy cost Jesus his life, it will surely cost us something as well.

But after this earthly existence, we will meet our Lord and dwell with him in a world of love—a new [heavens](#) and a new earth, where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."²³ There, no worry can enter. Because of Christ, the center of this world, we will all—without exception or diminishment—be happy.

²² For an account of how all our lives can be driven by joy, see John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (New York: Doubleday, 2011). See also John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Crossway, 2003).

²³ *The Holy Bible*, Revelation 21:4.