



THE HAPPINESS QUESTION

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Everyone has had one of those nights. One of those nights when you lay awake wondering about the deep questions of life. Here are some questions that have baffled me since I was a boy.

- Why do teachers leave out the letter E in the grading system? We have A, B, C, D, and F. Not even an E for effort, just F for “you’re a failure.”
- Why do they call them “Animal Crackers” when they are actually cookies?
- Why do we drive on a parkway, but park on a driveway? Who came up with that? Didn’t anyone have the courage to correct the guy?
- And the older I get I wonder about this science question. If the cells of the human body replicate every 7 years, why am I seven years older instead of 7 years younger?
- And the most baffling question in the universe, why do hot dogs come in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight?

Everyone has had one of those nights. One of those nights when you lay awake wondering about the deep questions of life. Questions about happiness and success, about meaning and significance. Questions about what’s real and what’s true. Questions about right and wrong. Questions about the problems in the world, and what we think about them. Questions about God. Is God real, and if He is, is it possible to know Him? And if we dare, we think about death and what happens when we die.

These are the human questions, questions everyone wonders about. Cats and dogs don’t think about these things. Only humans think about these questions.

We may try to ignore the questions. We may pass the time surfing the web or watching a movie, but the questions remain. We may ambitiously pursue a career or just fill the calendar with endless activity, but the questions still remain. They have to be answered. Because how we answer life’s big questions shapes who we are, what we believe, and how we live our lives. Whether you’re a Christian or not, spiritual or secular in your thinking, how you answer “the human questions” determines the foundation of your life, and whether or not that foundation is solid and true.

This morning, we’re going to ask the happiness question.¹ What is the key to happiness and meaning in life?

All of us want to be happy. The “pursuit of happiness” is the American dream.² It’s written in the Declaration of Independence. We could say it’s an American obsession. There are 93,268 books on happiness for sell on Amazon right now. There were 952 new releases on happiness in last 30 days. We want to be happy.

But we know by experience that happiness is fleeting. Life is a roller coaster of emotion. Sad things happen and, at best, happiness is temporary. That new car smell fades fast when you leave a dirty diaper in the back seat. After that great vacation to the beach, you have to go back to

work on Monday. After the movie, what's next? We're always looking for the next thing. That's why we fill our calendars with endless activity. That's why we're constantly scrolling on our phones for something stimulating.

Shawn admits that he is Disney junkie. We've got him in a support group called Disney Anonymous, so pray for Shawn. But he said Disney is the master of making the fake look real. The sights, the smells, the sounds, the food, the rides, the shows, it's all so stimulating. Then on the trip back home, he said, you stop at a truck stop in Georgia and go to a smelly restroom and the magic is over.

Several years ago, Tom Brady was interviewed on *60 Minutes* and said, "I have three Super Bowl rings (he has 5 now), and still think there's something greater out there for me. A lot of people would say I reached my goal, my dream, my life. But I think, God, there's got to be more than this." And the interviewer asked him, "What's the answer?" And Brady said, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."³ A lot of successful people admit that it feels like something is missing.

And a lot of people are depressed. Sixty years ago, only 10% of the American population suffered with depression, and that around the age of 30. Today, after all the advances in the last sixty years and all the things to make us happy, 50% of the population suffers to some degree with depression, and first appears at age 13.

This week I read Randy Alcorn's 480-page book on happiness. He cited 2,700 verses in the Bible on joy and happiness. He took 130 pages to explain all the words in the Bible that refer to happiness. He described the feasts and festivals and celebrations in the Bible, with eating and drinking and dancing, all meant to acknowledge God as the giver of all good things. He proved that happiness and joy is an overwhelming theme in the Bible. God wants us to know Him, and through knowing Him, to experience joy and happiness, peace and contentment, satisfaction and fulfillment, pleasure and well-being.

The Bible says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father" (James 1:17, NIV). Food, wine, nature, beauty, sex – it's all a gift from God. The Bible says, "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love" (Proverbs 5:18-19, NIV). All the pleasure and happiness in the world is a gift from God.⁴

But when we do not acknowledge God, the joy fades and leaves us empty. Pleasure in the object was never meant to last, only to point us to what does last – a personal relationship with God as the giver of all good things. What lasts is His lingering love and our longing to see Him face to face.

Beyond the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of meaning, and ultimate meaning can only be found only in God; in His truth, in His love, in His gifts, and in His best.

The Atlantic Monthly published an article entitled "There's More to Life than Being Happy," and the author made this insightful statement. "What sets human beings apart from animals is not the pursuit of happiness ... but the pursuit of meaning."⁵ Whether you're a Christian or not, spiritual or secular in your thinking, you have to agree. Happiness can be shallow and

temporary, but meaning endures. Meaning links our past, present, and future. Meaning gives definition, purpose, and identity to our lives.⁶

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THE SEARCH

King Solomon pondered the happiness question 3,000 years ago. Solomon's lofty throne provided the perfect view from which to observe the realities of life. And he reached some cynical conclusions. In the opening paragraph of Ecclesiastes, Solomon complains, "Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is meaningless ... I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and all is meaningless and chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14).⁷

Solomon was not just being pessimistic. Solomon dared to take an honest look at life, and he wrote down his observations for future generations to read. He had accomplished it all, accumulated it all, experienced it all, and enjoyed it all. And he shouts to us 3,000 years later, "I had it all, and it was still not enough!"

Solomon was searching for happiness and meaning, just like us. So he performed a grand experiment, and placed himself in that experiment.

Solomon searched for the meaning of life in ***wisdom. Surely the meaning of life can be found by acquiring wisdom and knowledge.*** "I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven ... and it was a grievous task" (Ecclesiastes 1:13, NAS). Solomon studied every discipline known to man. He read every philosophy proposed by man. He observed how hard people worked and found it meaningless. People looked like they were chasing after the wind.

He said, "What is crooked cannot be straightened" (Ecclesiastes 1:15, NAS). What he meant was that no matter how smart we become, we can't solve life's problems.⁸ Solomon was a king, and yet, felt helpless and hopeless. The more he studied life's problems, the more frustrated he became. It was all "meaningless and chasing after the wind."

So, Solomon turned to something else, to ***wine. Surely a person can be happy by enjoying the good life.*** If being a good student didn't make him happy, how about being the life of the party? So, Solomon threw himself into the pursuit of pleasure. "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.' ... I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly" (Ecclesiastes 2:1, 3, NAS). Notice he said, "while my mind was guiding me." Solomon didn't become an alcoholic; he was doing research.⁹ He became a connoisseur of the best the world had to offer.

What's wrong with living the good life? Nothing's wrong with enjoying life, but everything is wrong if the good life is the goal of life. Solomon found that living the good life can never fully satisfy the human heart. In his pursuit of pleasure, he said, "It too proved meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 2:1). When the party was over, he still felt empty.

Wisdom and wine did not satisfy, so he turned to *work*. ***Surely, the meaning of life can be found by achieving grand career goals.*** Listen to Solomon describe his efforts. “I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6, NIV). Solomon threw himself into his work.

All of us derive some degree of satisfaction and self-esteem from our jobs. But Solomon observed that “most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless – like chasing the wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:4, NLT). He observed that most people are driven by envy. Of course, you can derive a lot of satisfaction from our work, but you’re not going to find the ultimate meaning of life in your job or in achieving grand career goals.

Solomon kept searching. So what about *wealth*? ***Surely a person can be happy if they are rich, able to buy anything they want and have the financial security to take care of life’s problems.***

Solomon said, “I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.” If any nation should despise slavery it should have been Israel, whose history included 430 years of captivity in Egypt. Yet, Solomon’s indulgence led to slavery. He even bred slave families to manufacture his pleasures. “I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces” (Ecclesiastes 2:7-8, NIV). He owned 40,000 stalls of horses and had 12,000 horsemen.¹⁰ In one year, Solomon’s treasury received 800,000 ounces of gold, at today’s rate that would be over \$1 billion of gold.¹¹ His throne was made of ivory and overlaid with gold. His drinking goblets were solid gold.¹² Every three years ships would deliver new cargoes of gold and ivory, apes and peacocks; all for Solomon’s pleasure.¹³ He admitted, “Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure” (Ecclesiastes 2:10).

Solomon could afford the best the world had to offer, and yet he had to admit that it did not satisfy. He would later say, “Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 5:10, NIV). Wealth and financial security does not guarantee happiness.

When wisdom, wine, work, and wealth were not enough, ***Solomon turned to the pleasure of women. Maybe the only way to be happy is through sex.*** Solomon writes, “I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men – many concubines” (Ecclesiastes 2:8, NAS). The Bible says, “Solomon loved many foreign women” (1 Kings 11:1). He had 700 wives and 300 concubines.¹⁴ He collected women. A night in Solomon’s palace began with a lavish feast and the finest wines in the world. Then Solomon would be entertained by singers and dancers. He sat in pure opulence. The plates, the goblets, the food, the furniture – only the best. And later in the evening, he had his choice of 1,000 of the most beautiful women in the world.¹⁵

AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

Wisdom, wine, work, wealth, women. Solomon had it all. But it wasn’t enough. And he had to admit it.

“I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure ... But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless – like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.” (Ecclesiastes 2:9-11, NLT)

Solomon moaned about the futility of life. “No matter how wise I become, I’m no better than a fool. The fate of the wise man and fool is the same. Both are going to die.¹⁶ No matter how wealthy I become, I have to leave it all behind for someone else to enjoy.”¹⁷ Solomon exhausted himself in the pursuit of happiness, and in frustration said, “I hated life” (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

At this point, I could recommend tips on how to live a happy, meaningful life. Research says happy people are well connected to friends and family ... happy people are grateful and count their blessings ... happy people are generous and help other people ... happy people don’t compare themselves to others ... happy people are optimistic and look on the bright side of life. But tips are not enough. There has to be more than this, and there is.

A BETTER ANSWER

Beyond the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of meaning, and ultimate meaning can only be found only in God; in His truth, in His love, in His gifts, and in His best.

Solomon found the better answer.

Life does not have to be meaningless and happiness does not have to be fleeting. We can enjoy life as a gift from God. Solomon said, “There is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God” (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, NLT). We can enjoy life. Finding a job you love, raise a family and love your children, enjoy your friends, and sleep soundly at night. There is pleasure and joy in life and it is a gift from God.¹⁸

In his book on happiness, Randy Alcorn warns us about separating happiness from joy, and separating happiness from holiness. With overwhelming biblical evidence, he makes a convincing argument that God cares about our holiness and our happiness. He writes, “Putting God on the side of holiness and Satan on the side of happiness is a dangerous maneuver ... Satan is not about happiness; he is about sin and misery.”¹⁹ Then he cites James 1:17. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father.”

We can enjoy life as a gift from God.

Solomon’s better answer also included this truth. ***God has “set eternity” in our hearts*** (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We are meant for more than this life. We have a built-in need for something that nothing in this world can satisfy. We have a built-in need for God. We were meant to have a relationship with God. That’s why life is incomplete without Him. That’s why, without God, you feel like something is missing.

In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis compared our need for God to a car’s need for gasoline. “God Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn,” and then Lewis

added, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”²⁰ God has “set eternity” in our hearts, and it is only through a personal relationship with Him that we will be satisfied.

And here’s how Solomon ended his book. “The conclusion, when all has been heard,” when every opinion has been heard and when every experiment is complete, the conclusion is to “fear God and keep His commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NAS). ***The key to happiness and meaning in life is to “fear God and to keep His commandments.”***

To “fear God” is not being afraid of God. To “fear God” is a biblical phrase about respecting God. Respecting God as our Creator. Respecting God as our Father. It’s being humbled by how small we are in comparison to how big He is. And being grateful for all the blessings and joy and happiness He has allowed us to experience. “To keep His commandments” means following His ways and doing what He says because we believe that God wants the best for us and we trust that His way is always the best way.

Without God, you will always feel incomplete, disconnected, and uncertain. Living life without God means you’re on your own. It’s total self-reliance. You can pursue a great career, make a lot of money, fill your calendar, enjoy adventure, achieve your goals, and even raise a great family; but without God, there will always be the feeling that something missing.

But that doesn’t have to be the case.

If you are a Christian, you’ve heard this before. You know this is true. But some of you are still unhappy. And the reason is because you have drifted from the God, from the only one who can bring happiness and joy to your life. So, I challenge you to pursue Him. Pursue meaning by pursuing God, and all the happiness and joy will come.

If you’re not a Christian at this point in your life, listen to what Jesus said. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Do you hear that? Jesus came so that you might real life, eternal life, and that you might be filled with happiness that only God can provide. God loves you so much that He sent His Son for you. Through Jesus, you can be forgiven of everything you’ve ever done wrong. You can experience peace within and peace with God. And you can know with certainty that you will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven, in a place He called “Paradise.”

The Gospel really does promise “happily ever after.”

NOTES

¹ Timothy Keller's book *Making Sense of God*, speaks to the secular thinker about meaning and happiness. He fairly outlines the secular view and then exposes weaknesses in comparison to the Christian view. He explains why the Christian view is better, and more satisfying and coherent than the secular view.

² According to the United Nations' World Happiness Report, the happiest country in the world is Norway. Four of the top five happiest countries were Scandinavian countries. Why? Norway is the sixth wealthiest country in the world with the highest GNP per capita. Norway has very low crime rates and offers extensive social services. Free healthcare, free college education, and retirement all paid by the government. Ten months of paid maternity leave with a \$600 monthly per child benefit check. Norwegians do not worry because everything is taken care of, all due to a 78% tax rate!

³ Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2015), page 87. On page 385, Alcorn also cites the story of Abdalrahman in Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Abdalrahman, was a wealthy Muslim ruler who ruled for 50 years, and said, "I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot; they amount to fourteen. O man! Place not thy confidence in this present world!"

⁴ Happiness and joy is an overwhelming theme in the Bible. The Bible says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4, NAS). Jesus said, "(Everything I have said to you is so that) my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). The Lord said, "Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness" (Isaiah 51:11, NLT).

⁵ Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's More to Life than Being Happy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 9, 2013.

⁶ "Does Human Life Have Meaning?" www.debate.org. Several people were asked about the meaning of life, and here's what three people said. The first person said, "Yes, life has meaning. But it's your job to give it meaning. Life is like a ball of clay that you can shape as you see fit. You are the god of your own life." The second person said, "There's no purpose to life. We're just here for the ride. Enjoy it while it lasts." The third person said, "We exist because of coincidence and a few billion years of evolution. We have about as much purpose on earth as a squirrel." Wow that's inspiring! Don't you feel better now? Of course not. We need better answers than that. Because we have this innate desire for meaning. We have aspirations. We want our lives to count. We want to make a difference. That's why we become explorers and scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs, teachers and students, builders and artists. We also have an innate fear of missing out, a fear of a wasted life, a fear that this is all there is. And we realize that the clock is ticking. Whether you believe the Bible or not, you've got to agree when it says, "Life is like a breath of air; our days are like a passing shadow" (Psalm 144:4).

⁷ Solomon later said, "For people and animals share the same fate – both breathe and both must die. So people have no real advantage over the animals. How meaningless!" (Ecclesiastes 3:19, NLT).

⁸ Solomon said to himself, "I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them" (Ecclesiastes 1:16, NLT). Then he leaned back in his chair in frustration and said, "In much wisdom there is much grief" (Ecclesiastes. 1:18, NAS).

⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel writes in *Thus Spake Qoheleth: A Study Guide Based On An Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1983), page 40, "This search is not just reckless abandon, but rather a calculated search in the philosophy of hedonism."

¹⁰ 1 Kings 4:26.

¹¹ 1 Kings 10:14, 666 talents of gold, or 800,000 ounces.

¹² 1 Kings 10:21, 27.

¹³ 1 Kings 10:22.

¹⁴ See 1 Kings 11:3.

¹⁵ But it still wasn't enough. That's why Solomon later gave this advice, "Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life ... for this is your reward" (Ecclesiastes 9:9, NAS).

¹⁶ See Ecclesiastes 2:14-16.

¹⁷ See Ecclesiastes 2:18.

¹⁸ Keller writes, "Don't love anything less; instead learn to love God more, and you will love other things with far more satisfaction" (*Making Sense of God*, page 94).

¹⁹ Alcorn, *Happiness*, page 8.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1943, 1945, 1952), page 54. See also Alcorn, *Happiness*, page 91.