

“I grew up believing and repeating the mantra that God is more interested in our holiness than our happiness. But that idea reduces both holiness and happiness. The more profound truth, which Barnabas Piper so capably puts forth in this engaging and accessible book, is that growth in genuine holiness gives us the freedom to pursue profound and eternal happiness.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author,
God Does His Best Work with Empty

“It takes a bold soul to talk about happiness these days. What is it? Can we attain it? Is it ok to desire it? Will it last? Perhaps most important of all, does God want us to be happy? Barnabas Piper accepts the challenge to answer such questions and does a remarkably good job of it. There is an “earthy” realism in this book that is also profoundly spiritual and biblical. In speaking of happiness, Piper isn’t naïve, nor is he oblivious to heartache, disappointment, and pain. But he is confident in the goodness of God and the trustworthy nature of his promises. Did reading this book make me happy? Well, yes, it did! Highly recommended.”

Sam Storms, Author; Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church,
Oklahoma City, OK

“Who of us doesn’t want to be happy? But happiness is hard to find and hard to hold on to. Barnabas Piper’s new book, *Hoping for Happiness*, guides us gently away from frowning religiosity and away from giggly frivolity. Barnabas helps us toward Jesus, who overflows with happiness on offer to disappointed people who are trying to figure life out—which is every one of us.”

Ray Ortlund, Renewal Ministries, Nashville

“The pursuit of happiness, which some have called an ‘inalienable’ human right, can be painfully elusive. We chase happiness in all sorts of things, whether it be sex, money, power, food, fitness, career, religion, or some other good thing. But with so many good things at our disposal, why is happiness still so hard to find? In this helpful volume, Barnabas answers the question by helping us see that our enjoyment of good things is not the problem. Rather, the problem is our tendency to take good things and cling to them as ultimate things. In the tradition of St. Augustine, he reminds us of how hearts are restless until they find their rest in Christ. But in Christ, as the Scripture attests, there are pleasures forevermore.”

Scott Sauls, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee; Author, *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *A Gentle Answer*

“Somehow Barnabas Piper manages to cover nearly all that matters in life within the pages of this slim volume. Filled with the kind of common sense that isn’t common enough, yet at the same time turning some conventional thinking on its head, *Hoping for Happiness* manages to be philosophical, pastoral, and practical all at once.”

Karen Swallow Prior, Author, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books and Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

“I loved this book. The writing is so good, but what I find most special about *Hoping for Happiness* is the humility with which Barnabas communicates. Reading it felt like being served, and every page was a loving push toward the cross. We all want to be happy. We all want to hold on to happiness. This book is an excellent help.”

Scarlet Hiltibidal, Author, *Afraid of All the Things* and *He Numbered the Pores on My Face*

“We live in a sad time, among a people who are, it seems, divided between the downcast and the outraged. How, then, can one pursue happiness? That’s the question Barnabas Piper tackles in this book. With his skillful clarity and creativity (as always), Piper leads us to what it might mean to be a people surprised by joy and surprised to be happy at last. Read happily.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Much of my life has been spent chasing the next... (fill in the blank). Achievement. Experience. Feeling of that fleeting euphoria associated with being ‘happy.’ Before I met Jesus, I satiated this ache with relative impunity, fearing only the loss of what the next moment had to offer. After meeting Jesus, and particularly because of the tribe in which I found myself, eternal joy replaced ‘fleeting and fickle’ pleasures, and with it came a deep sense of guilt for enjoying anything about life. It has taken several years for me to be free to live and actually enjoy the temporal pleasures of this life relieved of either hedonism or shame. For these reasons and more, this book speaks to me and moves me at a core level. I believe it will do the same for all of us, no matter where we are on the spectrum in our pursuit of happy.”

Léonce B. Crump Jr., Author, *Renovate*;
Founder, Renovation Church

“Have you ever wondered if God actually cares if you are happy or not? In this book, *Hoping for Happiness*, Barnabas walks us all through what happiness actually means and looks like. Don’t worry; it’s good news. And—spoiler alert—yes, God cares about our happiness!”

Jamie Ivey, Author; Host, “The Happy Hour with Jamie Ivey” podcast

“For as long as I’ve known Barnabas, he has always lived what he writes, because he writes what he lives. *Hoping for Happiness* is Barnabas at his best: authentic, biblical, candid, and practical. He invites readers into the highs and lows of life, using Scripture as our necessary framework for navigating through every season. This work will help you find more realistic expectations, all the while seeing that it is possible to find happiness.”

D. A. Horton, Author, *Intensional*;
Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies,
California Baptist University

“Barnabas Piper’s book, *Hoping for Happiness*, combines biblical truth with practical wisdom to help us experience true happiness. We often try to squeeze happiness out of good things in life, like family, friends, marriage, or even church. But Barnabas shows us why this is wrongheaded and how we can find true happiness under the lordship of Christ.”

Preston Sprinkle, President, The Center for Faith,
Sexuality and Gender

“In a cultural moment when many of us have realized we’re drowning in unhappiness, Barnabas Piper’s book is the life raft we need. With clarity and compassion, Barnabas explores what true happiness looks like in reality. This book is so packed with wisdom and insight that it has the power to get us safely back to the solid ground of Christ-centered happiness.”

Sammy Rhodes, Author, *Broken and Beloved*

“Countless people are trying to quench their thirst for happiness with pursuits that over-promise and under-deliver. In this timely book, Barnabas Piper points us to a divine well of happiness that will never run dry.”

Costi W. Hinn, Pastor; Author, *God, Greed, and the
(Prosperity) Gospel*



BARNABAS PIPER

HOPING

FOR

HAPPINESS


the good book
COMPANY



Hoping for Happiness
© Barnabas Piper, 2020.

Published by:
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | www.thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Barnabas Piper has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

ISBN: 9781784984755 | Printed in Turkey

Design by André Parker

This book is dedicated to Immanuel Church of Nashville.

If I tried to name the individual people who have poured the hope and life of Jesus into me and into these pages, I would have to add whole chapters. Instead I will simply say thank you for your consistent, persistent dedication to walking in the light, outdoing one another in showing honor, welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed us, and showing me that there was hope and happiness to be had when I was at my most weary.

May the words of this book give to you some of the blessings you have shared with me.

CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Randy Alcorn</i>	11
Introduction	15
1. Living the Dream	19
2. Expecting Just Right	29
3. Hanging Happiness on Weak Hooks	39
4. We Live Cursed	49
5. That's My God's Truth	59
6. Evangeliguilt	67
7. Living in Times of Trouble	77
8. Don't Fear the Reaper	87
9. Does God Want Me to Be Happy?	95
10. Happiness <i>and</i> Holiness	103
11. The Pleasure of the Promise	111
12. Growing in Grounded Happiness	121
Postscript: Four Final Questions	129

FOREWORD

BY RANDY ALCORN

Spoiler alert: I loved *Hoping for Happiness*.

Barnabas Piper hooked me when he said, “One of the main reasons I wrote this book is because I was tired of wrestling with guilt over having fun and enjoying myself. It seemed strange that God would give so many wonderful gifts only for me to feel guilty for enjoying them.”

I grew up in a home with no knowledge of Jesus or the good news. I was often unhappy, spending night after night listening to music that promised happiness but failed to deliver it. Gazing at the night sky through my telescope, I longed for a connection to the wonders of the universe but couldn’t find one. When I was in high school, Jesus drew me to himself. Everyone—and first of all my mom—noticed the change. The most obvious difference? I became much happier.

I loved my first-ever church, but it struck me as strange when the pastor said, “God doesn’t want you happy; he wants you holy.” Well, I was holier than I’d ever been, but I was much happier too. Was something wrong with me?

That wonderful pastor often cited Oswald Chambers’ great book *My Utmost for His Highest*, which I eagerly read. But at

the time I didn't know enough to disagree when Chambers said, "Joy should not be confused with happiness. In fact, it is an insult to Jesus Christ to use the word happiness in connection with Him."

I certainly didn't want to insult Jesus by saying he was happy or he made me happy! And I couldn't for the life of me figure out the difference between joy and happiness. (In fact, they are synonyms for everyone except Christians who've been taught otherwise.)

After a steady diet of such teaching, I became wary of happiness. Had I seen this book, *Hoping for Happiness*, back then, I'd have thought, "We shouldn't hope for what God doesn't want us to have." I'd never have believed that I'd one day write a book titled *Does God Want Us to Be Happy?* And I would have assumed the answer must be a resounding no!

Like Barnabas, I felt guilty for being happy. The message seemed to be "You could impress God if you chose a life of miserable holiness." It took me decades to realize that this wasn't merely a misguided and thoroughly unbiblical idea; it was a lie from the pit of hell. It undermined the "good news of happiness" (Isaiah 52:7, ESV, NASB).

Barnabas writes, "Everyone, whether they believe in God or not, has a deep internal yearning for eternal significance and happiness." That's why it's counterintuitive and counterproductive to pit happiness and holiness against each other. Jesus himself, the holiest human there's ever been, was the life and soul of the parties he got invited to. (His first miracle was to rescue a wedding celebration that ran out of wine.) Children loved him. Had he been stern and unhappy, they wouldn't have.

Instead of "don't seek happiness"—a command impossible to obey anyway—why not "seek your primary happiness in Jesus, and fully enjoy the derivative happiness in his countless gifts, including family, friends, food, work and play"?

We love and serve one who reveals himself as a “happy God” (“blessed,” 1 Timothy 1:11; 6:15). We are to put our hope in “God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Barnabas calls on us to see God as “a generous Father, who showers you with good things day by day and invites you to enjoy them freely, daily, for your pleasure.”

The years I devoted to researching and writing various books on happiness were life-changing. I discovered Scripture speaks of exactly what I’d experienced: not a flimsy superficial optimism but a happiness that’s biblically grounded in the rock of Christ’s blood-bought promises.

Truth is, the good news should leak into every aspect of our lives, even if we’re not consciously talking about God or witnessing to someone. The “good news of happiness” should permeate our lives with, well, happiness. True holiness is happy-making, and all ultimate happiness is holy-making.

Barnabas couldn’t be more right when he says, “A laughing Christian who relishes good things is a compelling, magnetic Christian—the kind who draws people to truth.”

This echoes what J. C. Ryle wrote 150 years ago:

“It is a positive misfortune to Christianity when a Christian cannot smile. A merry heart, and a readiness to take part in all innocent mirth, are gifts of inestimable value. They go far to soften prejudices, to take stumbling blocks out of the way, and to make way for Christ and the gospel.”

There is no greater draw to the gospel than happy Christians who are full of grace and truth, quick to laugh and quick to weep for and comfort those who suffer.

My wife, Nanci, and I have been married for 43 years. In the last three, as we have faced her cancer together, we have found a deeper happiness in God and each other than ever before. We have known firsthand the “hopeful, grounded

realism” that Barnabas writes of. Trusting in Jesus has brought us great happiness in him, even amid suffering and the threat of death.

In this delightful book, you’ll see that Barnabas loves Jesus, family, sports, food, fun, God’s creation, and life in general. So do I. We don’t pass our peaks in this life. We don’t even begin to reach them. A new earth awaits us. I envision Christ’s laugh will be the loudest and longest at all those great feasts ahead of us. But why wait? Why not front-load our eternal happiness into our here-and-now and give ourselves and others a taste of heaven?

Hoping for Happiness says, “Hang your happiness on the right hooks, hang your hopes on God’s promises, fear him, and obey his commands—and in this you’ll find happiness, now and forever.”

I know how good this book is. I’ve read it. Now it’s your turn!

RANDY ALCORN

Founder and Director, Eternal Perspective Ministries;
Author, *Does God Want Us to Be Happy?*

INTRODUCTION

Is happiness possible?

When I began writing this book, the answer to that question seemed like a fairly obvious “yes.” I could look up from my laptop as I wrote in coffee shops and see a world full of happy people. Across the table from me a young couple would talk softly and giggle occasionally. They seemed happy. Outside, gaggles of bachelorette partygoers moseyed along the downtown Nashville streets, combining enthusiastic off-key warbling with copious adult-beverage consumption. They seemed happy. My daughters planned sleepovers with friends, complete with movies, junk food, crafts, and very little of the aforementioned sleep. They were so happy. At the end of each week we’d head to church to worship and be refreshed and encouraged. It was a happy time.

Shortly after I turned the manuscript in, however, the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, and all that disappeared in the space of weeks. Thousands upon thousands of people died, and the workings of entire nations ground to a halt. It was terrifying and overwhelming. Never in our collective lifetime had we faced such uncertainty. Happiness

was lost for some, called into question by many, and redefined for others.

In the aftermath of a global pandemic, the answer to the question “Is happiness possible?” might sound a little different. When I set out to write this book, I thought I might have to persuade some readers to reconsider their definition of happiness—to rattle some cages and show how fleeting our sources of happiness are—before offering hope and direction. Now few of us need to be persuaded that so many of the things we look to for happiness are actually rather fragile. But more than ever, we need to know what true happiness is and how to find a version of it that cannot be shaken.

So let me begin by saying this: YES, happiness is possible. That is what this book is about—to help you find your way to a true, lasting, grounded sense of happiness. But it also seeks to answer some of those other questions that have bubbled to the surface: the ones we probably should have been asking before our worlds were rattled and that we can hardly ignore any longer.

If happiness is so attainable, why are our lives marked by such a desperate search for it? Why are we so often unsatisfied, grasping at what is next, groping for what is better, and racing after what is new and undiscovered? Why is it that even while we are in the midst of pleasure we are thinking of the *next* pleasure? It’s an exhausting way to live.

But let me reassure you: this book is not going to tell you to stop pursuing happiness. That would be like saying, “Give up on life.” Nor am I going to tell you to just look ahead to future joy with Christ and find all your happiness there. That would be to diminish the value of all that God has given us in the present. Instead, I’m going to show you a third option that exists in the tension between those two extremes. We must neither be so dedicated to earthly happiness as to never attain infinite joy nor so “heavenly-minded” as to be no

earthly good. Both errors disconnect us from the real stuff and substance of life as God intends us to live it.

In this book, the first four chapters are, in essence, clearing the ground, helping us to see why happiness often proves elusive. Having done that, we'll be in a position to put in place the building blocks of a better, firmer, more stable kind of happiness.

I am slowly learning to take hold of this right kind of happiness. It would be gross arrogance to say I have "arrived." But I am learning, mistake by mistake—with my failures in view but my eyes fixed on Jesus—more of what it means to be truly happy. As you read this book, I hope that you too will discover a perspective that leads you to a new kind of happiness—a grounded and hopeful sort. I hope you'll escape the frenzied pursuit of the next source of happiness and relish the ones God has given you, with an eye toward what he will give you forever and ever.

Yes, you can be happy.

CHAPTER 1

LIVING THE DREAM

From the beginning of time, people have been chasing dreams.

In years gone by the dream might have been a patch of land to farm where a person could raise a family, earn a living, and die in peace. Or to “go west, young man” and stake a claim. For others it was to make it in the big city and to bask in the electric glow of industrial stability. Bohemian types dreamt of becoming artists and creators who could write and sing and give voice to truth. Still others spent their lives fighting for the dream of a free society of equals, where every person could enjoy all the rights and privileges they were due.

Over time the dream became decidedly more domesticated and suburban. Instead of a rural spread, people wanted a house, a spouse, a dog, a car, and 1.5 kids. They wanted a fair wage, weekends off, and chicken on Sundays. They wanted the home team to win, cold drinks on summer days, meat on the grill, and a yard full of friends. They wanted to send their kids to college and see them do something productive with their lives, as measured in dollars or babies.

So what about now? Maybe those nostalgic descriptions sound like the kind of life you want today. Or maybe they feel like harkening back to the myth of the “good ol’ days,” which never really existed except in our collective memory.

While the *shape* of our dreams may have changed since yesteryear, the *feel* of our dreams has not: we all want to be happy. It is baked into the human psyche.

Some people are thrill-seekers; others are homebodies. Some people are loners; others love big families or communities. Some people express creatively; others consume what is created. Some sing; others listen to music. Some cook; others are foodies. And some people have tried it all. No matter what, all people desire to feel happy.

So if we were trying to sketch a portrait of “the American dream” in the 21st century, what would it look like? It would be fair to say that two of the most common avenues through which people pursue happiness are work and relationships. People want work that matters and relationships that fulfill.

TODAY’S DREAMS: WORK THAT MATTERS

Several years ago I was at a friend’s house one evening with a couple of other guys I didn’t know. We got to talking about work, since that’s the safest and most neutral conversation territory (unless you find out one of you is a pastor or in politics). They asked me what I did, and I told them that I was in marketing for a publishing company. My description must have lacked some pep though because one of the men asked me, “Do you love your job?” I answered that I was satisfied in my work and grateful for my position. His response was “Man, if you don’t *love* your job, you should quit and go find something else.”

On one level, it sounds like inspirational, life-changing advice. But just notice what his words reveal. He believes that the only work worth doing is work that you love. In his view, total happiness in your job is almost a right—anything else is

letting yourself down and living less than a whole life. He is not alone in that perception; it is pervasive.

This is tricky to understand because work is good; it's one of the things we were placed on this earth to do—we should value work and even enjoy it. But it seems that our desires have been skewed.

Today our dreams around work are rooted in many of the same desires as those of previous generations—security, comfort, accomplishment, expression, individuality—but with two significant differences: our dreams tend to be simultaneously more grandiose and more self-centered. As we look outward, we dream of changing the world, making a difference, and leaving our mark. As we look inward, we dream of loving ourselves, being whole, and achieving self-actualization. So we look for a job that will help us fulfill both the grand outward dreams and the self-focused ones (or rather, we look to fulfill the self through outward accomplishments).

We want a satisfying job, but we often define satisfaction differently than previous generations did. No longer is financial security enough. We measure satisfaction more by the emotions than the biweekly paycheck or company pension plan. The question we ask of our job is: do I *feel* satisfied?

Don't believe me? Think about how often people change careers now compared to previous generations. Consider the number of professional athletes who want to be musicians, the number of musicians who want to be actors, and the number of actors who want to run for political office.

Or think about the number of times you've heard someone talk wistfully about branching out on their own, being their own boss, and earning a living through doing what they are passionate about. Entrepreneurialism is often seen as the peak of vocational success and as the panacea for workplace dissatisfaction. It is fast-moving, challenging, and fulfilling; and ideally it makes a difference in the world too. It's basically

a workplace utopia—financial success blended with total freedom and a dose of goodwill toward mankind.

Or how many people do you know who dream about doing something creative for a living? Books, poetry, music, visual arts, screenplays, drama, dance—these are certainly all good things. It would be great to create something meaningful and beautiful, and gain critical acclaim and commercial success at the same time.

Whether it's entrepreneurial or artistic, most of us dream of doing work that matters and of having the freedom to do so on our own terms. We want the work to be quality, and we want it to connect with the right people. We want to be in charge of the schedule, the direction, and the purpose. Of course, we still want to make a living (and there will be many people reading this for whom just getting by is a big enough dream in itself). But most of us want more than work that pays; we want work that we love.

TODAY'S DREAMS: RELATIONAL FULFILLMENT

The second defining dream of Western culture is the desire for relational fulfillment. We yearn for it, imagine it, and fantasize about it. The cultural atmosphere in which we live both subtly and explicitly tells us—through advertising, music, movies, television, books, podcasts, and just about any other medium—that wholeness and happiness come through a meaningful relationship. If we don't have such a relationship, we need to find one. And if we do have such a relationship, we picture all the ways in which it could be better.

When we read the word "relationship," we instinctively read it as referring to a *romantic* relationship; and when we think of romantic relationships, we usually think of *sexual* relationships. In most people's minds, it is inconceivable that a person could be happy without the freedom to have sexual relationships of whatever quality and quantity they desire.

This is too often true among Christians as well. Many of us have come to believe what society tells us about which relationships are most meaningful and which ones offer true happiness. Romantic sexual relationships are ultimate; other types of relationship are, if not second tier, then somehow diminished; and relationships that aren't fulfilling need to be ended quickly. This isn't to say that we care nothing about meaningful friendships (that would make us a sociopath). It's that the subconscious sexualization of our minds has shaped how we think happiness can be found.

Our skewed beliefs are actually based in truth. (After all, the best lies include a healthy dose of truth, or they would never be believed.) We are relational beings. God made us to be in community: to have deep friendships and with the capacity to fall in love. The gravitational pull we feel toward relational intimacy is God-given. Yet instead of looking for happiness in the plethora of relationships God created (sibling, cousin, friend, parent, neighbor, co-worker, significant other, etc.), we've limited the promise of deepest happiness to one kind of relationship. By putting all our chips on that square we have more chance of going broke than winning the happiness jackpot.

SO... HOW'S EVERYBODY DOING?

So after decades of dedicated pursuit of these dreams... How are we? Are we happy? Have we arrived at a fulfilled dream?

According to my observation and experience, the answers to these questions are, in order: not well, nope, and not yet and with little hope of ever doing so. We are stressed and anxious and dissatisfied. The grander our dreams get and the more they turn inward, the less happy we seem to be. Our response to this unhappiness is to pursue our dream harder or to pursue another version of the same dream—another job, another cause, another relationship. If the definition of insanity is

trying the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results, well, we have just diagnosed ourselves.

Which raises the question: why in the world do we keep doing this to ourselves?

THE WISH YOUR HEART MAKES

Cinderella has crooned these seminal words to tens of millions of people over the years: “A dream is a wish your heart makes ... If you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true.” These lyrics encapsulate the direction we feel we must take in order to find happiness: we must follow our hearts! Listen to your heart’s desires, conjure a dream, and then get after it.

But if chasing dreams leads only to more chasing, and if our dreams are not delivering on their promise of satisfaction, how reliable are our hearts really? Think about it.

When we don’t have something, our hearts want it.

When we have plenty of something, plenty is never enough. Our hearts want more.

When someone else has something, our hearts want what they have.

When we have a hundred different things, our hearts want the hundred and first thing.

When we have accomplished something, our hearts immediately turn to somewhere else where we might succeed.

Our hearts always want something more, newer, better, different—whether it be in regard to sex, money, achievement, self-esteem, health, fitness, attractiveness, job satisfaction, relational fulfillment, purpose, or anything. So our hearts make wishes which become our dreams, and then we chase. And we chase. And we chase some more. And yet our hearts are not satisfied.

Our dreams don’t ever come fully or lastingly true. The job is stimulating and you post on Instagram about how it’s

your “dream job,” for about six weeks. You train for the half marathon and feel amazing; then you finish the race. You get married, and it’s blissful; then conflict happens and trust issues arise. I could go on, but you’ve lived this in one way or a hundred and know full well what I am writing about—if, that is, you’re willing to pause in the midst of the chase and reflect on it for a moment.

A KIND OF HAPPINESS

Now for a necessary clarification: I don’t think life is bad. Nor do I think meaningful work, money, achievements, creative ventures, relationships, or sex are bad. God didn’t put us in this world to be miserable. Quite the opposite—the world is overflowing with good things, pleasurable things, things that deliver happiness. And they are created by God. He intended us for happiness.

And sometimes we *are* happy. If our pursuit of happiness turned up nothing at all, life would be bleaker than a Cormac McCarthy novel and sadder than a Jason Isbell song. The reason we keep chasing our dreams is because they do deliver a version of happiness, at least for a time and to an extent. Having money and possessions is nice. Accomplishing things is satisfying. Getting fit feels great and looks good. Sex is enjoyable. These things make us happy.

But we have gotten happiness twisted. We cannot escape the words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). Dreams are the wishes our hearts make, but our hearts are not reliable guides. Our hearts have taken good things from God and conjured up fever dreams of them as things in which we can find our identity and on which we can build our lives. But these objects of happiness were not created to bear that burden.

As one man in Scripture knew better than most...

ALL IS VANITY

No book in the Bible speaks to a life of chasing dreams and trying to be happy like Ecclesiastes. And, boy, does it start with a bang. After a phrase of introduction these are the first words from the mouth of the Preacher:

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)*

From this point, Solomon (the Preacher)—the wealthiest king of his day and the wisest man in history (non-Jesus division)—obliterates the things on which we place our expectations of happiness category by category. He starts with a sweeping statement and backs it up throughout the remainder of this chapter and the entire book. We will come back to Ecclesiastes often as a foundation for understanding happiness, expectations, and reality in general. For now, though, focus on this core statement: all is, in fact, vanity.

What does that mean? To understand the remainder of the passage, and the rest of the book, understanding this word is vital. Today we talk about “vanity” as being proud in one’s appearance. We think of it as something shallow and inherently valueless.

That isn’t what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes means, though. David Gibson, in his excellent book *Living Life Backward*, explains it this way: “The Preacher is saying that everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke” (Crossway 2017, p 19). His use of vanity means ephemeral, passing, vaporous. He is saying that everything in this life has limits to its value because it has limits to its life span. The implication is that “all is vanity” *if we try to find permanent satisfaction and happiness in it*. The point is the *temporal* nature of the happiness we find in this life, not that there is no happiness to be found in life.

Temporal does not mean sinful or foolish or idolatrous. It just means temporary. So Ecclesiastes is not saying that

happiness is pointless. It is saying that seeking lasting happiness and basing our hopes on temporal things is sinful, foolish, and idolatrous. Ecclesiastes reframes our understanding of happiness in terms of time, eternity, and mortality. And that reframing must reframe our dreams and how we chase them.

IT'S NOT ALL BAD NEWS

The goal of this book is not to ruin your happiness. It is not to bring a storm cloud into every sunny day, point out every looming disappointment, predict the failure at the end of every success, and revel in the inevitable disappointments of life. I hate unhappiness. I hate yours and mine.

My aim in this book is to help you discover a happiness that is better than that which your dreams have promised you. It is to reframe your expectations in a way that reflects reality as God defines it in the Bible, so that they are true. It is to set you free from the manic pursuit, so that you can live a life that's grounded, hopeful, and, yes, genuinely happy.