

WISDOM UNIVERSITY

PROVERBS 3:13-20

CHRISTIAN HEDONISM (3)

GOD SATISFIES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

DAVID MURRAY
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INTRODUCTION

Problem

If Christianity offers the best way to happiness, how come there are unhappy Christians? If God promises to satisfy our desire for happiness, how come there are unhappy Christians? These are important questions, because if God cannot satisfy our desire for happiness, then we want to know that and try something else.

We don't want to be pursuing happiness via Christianity if it's all a scam. On the other hand, if Christianity is the best way to happiness, we don't want unhappy Christians to put us and others off. How can we defend the claim that God satisfies our desire for happiness despite the existence of unhappy Christians?

CONTEXT

In Proverbs 2-3, God calls us to enroll in Wisdom University by highlighting the benefits of being a student in his school:

- Moral benefits of Wisdom (2:5-21)
- Material benefits of Wisdom (3:1-12)
- **Emotional benefits of Wisdom** (3:13-20)
- Social benefits of Wisdom (3:21-35)

Over the last two sermons, we've been savoring the emotional benefits of Christianity. There are a number of these—peace, love, hope, contentment—but we focused on happiness, because that's the emphasis of this passage, and that's the most common emotion that drives and motivates people.

We laid out the series as follows:

1. God approves the pursuit of happiness
2. God re-directs the pursuit of happiness
3. God satisfies the pursuit of happiness

In the first sermon, we saw that God gave the desire for happiness, approves of it, and addresses it in the Gospel.

In the second, we saw that God re-directs the pursuit of happiness. He doesn't stop it or condemn it, but encourages it and directs us to find it in a new way and direction. God does not say, "Stop wanting happiness!" but rather, "Get it in me." As we discovered, that involves delivering the right raw materials to our desire factories: God's Wisdom, God's Word, God's Worship, God's Works, and God's Ways.

In this sermon, we will identify the serious challenges to the truth claim that God satisfies our desire for happiness. Then we will build some substantial defenses around this truth, as Solomon put it in Proverbs 3:17: "Her (Wisdom's) ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."



So, what undermines the claim that God satisfies our desire for happiness?



1. THERE ARE SERIOUS CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS

It's not only opponents of Christianity who challenge the claim that the Christian life is the happiest life; so does the Bible, Christian history, and Christian experience.

- Solomon noted how the wicked and the good seem to receive the same blessings and pains (Eccl. 9:1-3).
- The psalmists often struggled with the prosperity of the wicked and the sufferings of the righteous (Ps. 37; 73).
- Job was a godly man and yet suffered more than most (Job 1-2).
- The Bible promises persecution and pain for Christians (John 15:18-21; 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12).
- The Christian life is portrayed as a narrow and difficult way (Matt. 7:13-14).
- Christianity involves self-denial and self-sacrifice (Matt. 16:24; Luke 14:28).
- The Bible and church history have many examples of believers who suffered for their faith (Heb. 11:32-37).
- Christians have to obey difficult commandments (Matt. 5:43-48).
- Christians have to say no to many pleasures (Isa. 58:13).
- Christians suffer unpleasant discipline (Heb. 12:11).

APPLICATION

♥ It's important for Christians to recognize and acknowledge these challenges to Christian happiness. It helps us to prepare for some of these experiences ourselves, and not be surprised and destabilized by them. It also helps us to communicate honesty to people we are trying to persuade to become Christians. It is better to acknowledge the difficulties and challenges of the life of faith and try to explain them rather than deny them.

♥ If you're not a Christian, I want you to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Truth 1: Christianity is the best way to happiness. Truth 2: Christianity doesn't promise you nothing but happiness. I know there are so-called Christian ministers who promise nothing but health, wealth, and prosperity if you become a Christian. You will be disappointed and disillusioned if you follow them. It's far safer to know the truth.

THE SAFEST WAY TO CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS
IS TO ADMIT CHRISTIAN UNHAPPINESS



So, how can we defend the truth that God satisfies happiness?



2. THERE ARE SUBSTANTIAL DEFENSES OF CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS

How can we show that God satisfies the desire for happiness without abandoning verses that seem to teach the opposite? I'd like to offer ten defenses of this truth. Not all of these defenses are relevant in every case, but neither is one defense enough in every case. So, depending on your situation or that of others, pick the best defenses you can find from this selection.

Defense 1: Enemies misrepresent the Christian religion

In addition to biblical challenges, the enemies of the Christian faith truth love to highlight what seem to be contradictions in the Bible. Perhaps they have turned from Christianity and try to make others do the same. Or perhaps they don't want Christianity to be true and therefore work at misrepresenting it. Because they know happiness is such a powerful argument for Christianity, they do everything they can to portray it as unhappy and to magnify every example of unhappiness.



When people attack Christianity, ask yourself, "What's their motive?" Are they motivated by a genuine love of you and of truth or by hatred and a desire to sin?

Defense 2: Christians misrepresent the Christian religion

It's not only the enemies of Christ that present Christianity in a bad light; even Christ's friends can do so too. Some Christians are experts at misrepresenting Christianity as a miserable experience. Some chose to be sad and sour and bring misery upon themselves as well as damage their witness to others. They chose to be doubtful, fearful, and miserable. They are sinfully sad, sad for no good reason,



Don't blame God for Christian's misrepresentations of their faith. Don't judge Christianity by some of its followers' mistakes. And if you're a Christian who is sad for no good reason, and maybe a bad reason, repent, for your own benefit and that of others.

Defense 3: There are sad times in the Christian life

Remember one of our earlier principles for interpreting Proverbs. "Wisdom will usually make your life better in the long run." Proverbs are not so much cast-iron guarantees but general rules that do have some exceptions. Therefore, although Proverbs 3:17 points to the general happiness of the Christian life, there are times of sadness too. For example, when God convicts us of sin, it can be an immensely painful time even though God pronounces us blessed (Matt. 5:3-4). Also, God may sovereignly hide his face from his people for a time to try and improve their faith (2 Chron. 32:31; Job 23:10; WCF 5.5).



When God convicts us of sin or withdraws his face, it is to produce greater joy in the future. In such times, keep your eye on the long-term gain that will follow short-term pain



Defense 4: There are suffering times in the Christian life

Physical and mental illness can make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the Christian to experience joy. Although John Piper's Christian hedonism allows for times when the Christian is not overflowing with joy, and he has tried to address suffering such as mental illness in *When I Don't Desire God* and *When the Darkness Won't Lift*, he does not sufficiently distinguish between times when the darkness is mental illness that a person is not responsible for, and when it is brought on by sinful choices. Although he recognizes that it may sound harsh, he insists that "failing to rejoice in God when we are commanded to rejoice is sin." This does not account for the possibility of mental illness that a person is not responsible for. Neither does it account for times of overwhelming suffering during terminal illness and persecution.



"Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4), does not mean unhappy times are sinful. Rather it means that we are to fight for joy in God even when there is immense suffering in our lives. Remember, Jesus was not always a happy person, but he was always a holy person.

Defense 5: There are sinful times in the Christian life

Proverbs 3:17 assumes that the Christian is walking in God's ways. It's in these ways that happiness is found. If we stray from these ways, we stray from happiness. Christian happiness is never separate from holiness.



When we are unhappy, we should search out the cause. When we fall into sinful ways, we must make use of all the means God has provided to regain holiness and happiness

Defense 6: Christians make mistakes

We can have mistaken views of God and the Christian life that can diminish and damage our happiness:

- We view God more as a Judge than a Father, someone only to be feared rather than also delighted in.
- We make the Christian life more of a burden than it need to be by adding to God's commands an unreasonable strictness. Unnecessary obligations, strictness, burdens, and controversies weaken the pleasure of religion.
- We get involved in too much controversy and debates, making majors out of minors.
- We put the wrong raw materials we put into our desire factories.
- We end up overdoing our well-doing, resulting in burning out with physical and emotional exhaustion.
- We don't realize how much work is required to experience Christian happiness. Although it is a gift, God calls us to use the means he has provided.
- We make the mistake of aiming primarily at happiness instead of primarily at God (SC 1)



We are especially vulnerable to these mistakes early in our Christian life. As we go on in the Christian life, and as we learn more about God and his ways, the joy can deepen as the truth deepens its hold upon us and purges error from us.



Defense 7: Present difficulties are compensated for with present pleasures

Although there are pains on one side of the scale, there are pleasures on the other side (2 Cor. 6:3-10; 12:9). Although there are pains in obedience and service, it is balanced out by the pleasure of God's encouraging and enabling in the difficulty. Although we must deny ourselves some bodily pleasures, this results in the enjoyment of superior spiritual pleasures.



Compensating pleasures are not always experienced at exactly the same time as the pains. Joy in affliction can be a process (Rom. 3:3-5).

Defense 8: The wicked's pleasures are shallow and short

The Bible explains away the seeming happiness of the worldly as shallow (Ecclesiastes 1-2) and short (Psalm 73). Their worldly pleasure is but for a season (Heb. 11:25), their eternal pain is forever (Luke 16:19-30).



When you are tempted to envy the wicked and their pleasures, remember their end (Psalm 73:16-17)

Defense 9: The Christian's patience in suffering is an effective apologetic

Although the happy Christian is a great argument for Christianity and an effective apologetic, God can also use the Christian who trusts God's Word and perseveres regardless of the nothing on the pleasure side of the scale. Their sustained faith in God and his Word despite every discouragement to the contrary could be its own apologetic evidencing the power of Christ in their lives. God can be more honored by the suffering depressed believer holding on by faith than by the happy Christian who has every reason and help to hold on. Piper says that pursuing joy in God is "a non-negotiable way of honoring God." How does this explain the experience of Job who despite his murmurings and complaints, is held out as an example, not of joy in suffering, but of endurance and perseverance in suffering (James 5:11)?



When you are suffering, remember that Job was held out by God as an example, not of joy in suffering but of endurance and perseverance in suffering (James 5:11). You may feel like you are a bad witness, but God can use your patience in suffering as an effective apologetic.

Defense 10: Future eternal happiness will make up for these present sufferings

When eternity is taken into account, there is certainly more gain than pain, but not always before that (Mark 8:34-35; Mark 10:28-30; and John 12:25).



When suffering makes you question, "Is this worth it?" remember: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17)

THE CHRISTIAN IS NOT HAPPY ALL THE TIME,
BUT WILL BE FOR ALL TIME.



CONCLUSION



PRAYER: Happy God, thank you for sharing your happiness with me. Help me to demonstrate and defend the happiness of being a Christian

FURTHER STUDY

Online Articles

- [Are you Chasing Happiness or Holiness?](#) by Tony Reinke
- [Five Reasons the Puritans were so Joyful](#) by Joel Beeke
- [Experiencing Happiness in Sorrow and Depression](#) by Randy Alcorn
- [Hope for the Unhappy Christian](#) by Phillip Holmes

Books

- [When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy](#) by John Piper
- [When the Darkness Won't Lift](#) by John Piper
- [The Way to True Happiness](#) by Ralph Venning
- [The Art of Happiness](#) by Francis Rous

Discussion Questions

1. Growing up, did you think Christianity was a happy religion? Why or why not?
2. Why is it important to recognize and address seeming contradictions to Christian happiness?
3. Why are some uncomfortable with using the happiness of Christianity in evangelism?
4. What defenses have you used to defend Christianity as a way to happiness?
5. How have you or people you know demonstrated happiness in suffering and sadness?
6. What mistakes have you made in the Christian life that reduced your happiness?
7. How would you help a depressed Christian be "sorrowful yet always rejoicing"?

First Byron Christian Reformed Church
8541 Byron Center Ave SW, Byron Center, MI 49315
Phone: (616) 878-9768
www.firstbyroncrc.org

Dr. David Murray
www.HeadHeartHand.org
www.prts.edu

CHRISTIAN HEDONISM (3) GOD SATISFIES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

If Christianity is the best way to happiness, how are there so many unhappy Christians?

Biblical answer?



Serious Challenges to Christian Happiness

- Wicked prosper, Christians suffer
- Godly Job's sufferings
- Promises of persecution
- Christian way is narrow way
- Self-denial and self-sacrifice
- Examples in Bible and history
- Difficult commandments
- No to pleasures
- Unpleasant discipline

SAFEST WAY TO CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS IS ADMIT CHRISTIAN UNHAPPINESS

Any defenses?

"IF YOU ASK ME, 'DOESN'T THE WORLD NEED TO SEE CHRISTIANS AS HAPPY IN ORDER TO KNOW THE TRUTH OF OUR FAITH AND BE DRAWN TO THE GREAT SAVIOR?' MY ANSWER IS 'YES, YES, YES!' AND THEY NEED TO SEE THAT OUR HAPPINESS IS THE INDOMITABLE WORK OF CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF OUR SORROW."

JOHN PIPER



"THEIR PLEASURES ARE ENSLAVING, OURS ENLARGING; THEIR SAPPING, OURS SATISFYING; THEIRS OFFENSIVE TO GOD, OURS PLEASING TO HIM; THEIRS WILL END IN PAIN AND BITTERNESS, OURS WILL BE PERFECTED IN ENDLESS JOYS."

MATTHEW HENRY



Joyfully demonstrate and honestly defend the happiness of Christianity



Substantial Defenses of Christian Happiness

- Enemy misrepresentation
- Christian misrepresentation
- Sad times
- Suffering times
- Sinful times
- Christian mistakes
- Present compensation
- Wicked pleasures short & shallow
- Suffering as an apologetic
- Future eternal happiness

THE CHRISTIAN IS NOT HAPPY ALL THE TIME, BUT WILL BE FOR ALL TIME

Action?