

Happiness & Joy: is there a Difference? Introduction (Rejoicing in Real Life)

Lynn Barton
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Is it ok to want to be happy? And is there a difference between happiness and joy?

For starters, it is not only ok to be happy, God wants us to be happy. In scripture we are told repeatedly to rejoice, be happy, celebrate, and so on. Once you start looking for it, you see it everywhere. There are over 2700 passages in the Bible containing words like joy, gladness, rejoicing, happiness, etc.¹ A.W. Tozer wrote, "The people of God ought to be the happiest people in all the wide world."²

Then why is it that Christians feel sort of guilty about their passionate desire to be happy? Maybe because it seems selfish. It seems like we ought to be dying to ourselves, serving others, and sacrificing, and none of those sound like happiness-producing activities. But when you think about it, they are. Even Jesus did what he did for the sake of happiness: "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame..." (Hebrews 12:2). He wanted the joy that would come after he had suffered. So we see that it is very right to seek happiness, and Jesus shows us the way.

When I was a new believer, for the first few years I was confused about this. After all, I had lived thirty years of my life for me, myself, and I. How was I supposed to know if what I was doing was out of love for the Lord, or because I secretly wanted to do that thing because I enjoyed it? I was mixed up, thinking that enjoying something tainted it with selfishness. So I deliberately did things I really did not enjoy. But notice the focus on self? That was my error: I was still thinking about myself, trying to be an "unselfish" person. Over time things began to sort themselves out.

Sometimes people say things like, "God doesn't care about your happiness; he cares about your holiness." Au contraire! Now, there is a sense in which that is true; God is willing to make us unhappy for the goal that we should be made holy, but that is only half the story. In fact holy people are the happiest people in the world. How do I know? Because God is supremely happy, and he is holy. Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness no one will see the Lord. When we meet the Lord, we hope to hear from his lips, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter in to the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25).

The next question is whether there is a difference between joy and happiness. This distinction did not even exist until the 20th century. You know, the idea that happiness is based on "what

¹ <https://www.epm.org/blog/2015/Oct/16/my-little-book-gods-promise-happiness>

² Ibid.

happens,” while joy is constant, and deep, and spiritual. Or Christians have joy, but the world only has fleeting “happiness.” A google search brings up many articles making this distinction. The idea seems to be that joy is inward, in God, and doesn’t change, while happiness is outward focused, based on what happens.

According to Randy Alcorn, author of two books on happiness (*Happiness*, and the Reader’s Digest version, *God’s Promise of Happiness*),³ this idea seems to have originated with Oswald Chambers, author of the classic *My Utmost for his Highest* and a great saint. Chambers saw people justifying their sin because they wanted to be happy, and he developed this idea that joy and happiness are different.

Certainly seeking happiness in sin is wrong and destructive, but scripture does not distinguish between joy and happiness. Randy Alcorn, John Piper, and Joni Eareckson Tada have all argued this is a false distinction that has created confusion and should be dispensed with.⁴ I agree. Scripturally there is no distinction between joy and happiness.

I’ve got to close with this incredible quote from G.K. Chesterton that popped up in my newsfeed on Wednesday (and you thought facebook was a waste of time!)

Jesus promised his disciples three things: that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.⁵

That, my friends, is the authentic Christian life. And as long as we are going to be in constant trouble, we might as well be absurdly happy. That’s our goal for the rest of this conference. I’m looking forward to seeing you all tomorrow.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-happiness-different-from-joy>

⁵ As far as I can tell, he said it. It’s the sort of thing he would say, anyway.

<https://reformingtheline.wordpress.com/2016/01/24/no-one-would-be-more-pleased-than-g-k-chesterton/>

Truth: Foundation of Joy
Session I (Rejoicing in Real Life)
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Losing Confidence in the Truth

Andrei Sakharov, the scientist who gave the Soviets the atomic bomb, said near the end of his life: "I always thought the most powerful weapon in the world was the bomb. I have changed my mind. The most powerful weapon in the world is not the bomb. It is the truth."⁶

Why is truth the most powerful thing in the world? Why is it so controversial? And what does truth have to do with joy? Seems like these days making any kind of declaration of truth invites attack, and feeling the hatred of those around us is not exactly a joyful experience.

In today's world of fake news and bold-faced lying wherever we look, I don't have to convince you that we are swimming in lies, so many lies that it is hard to know what or whom to believe any more. When I was growing up, it was not like this. Things have changed dramatically. Of course, lies have always been with us. In the 19th century Charles Spurgeon quipped (not Mark Twain as it is often misreported): "A lie will go round the world while truth is still pulling its boots on."⁷ So lying is nothing new. But we do seem to be in a time where lying is growing exponentially.

Let's start with a definition of the word "truth" to make clear what I mean by the word. *Truth is that which corresponds to, or accurately describes, reality.*

Truth is objective; meaning it exists whether or not anyone believes it. We don't get to make it up. Science retains this same definition; scientific truth is that which corresponds to, or accurately describes, the natural world. Christians believe that truth exists not only about the physical world, but about the spiritual dimensions of life. Since God created the world, he defines truth and morality. Jesus, God the Son, called himself THE truth. All truth comes from God and points back to God.

The Bible claims to give truth about God and man, and its claims are supported by archaeology, history, eye witness testimony, etc. It is not a scientific book per se, yet it does make claims about the natural world that turn out to be true, such as God hangs the earth on nothing, or he stretches the heavens out (we know scientifically that the universe is expanding). Much of this

⁶ <https://blogs.lt.vt.edu/malw14/2015/11/16/andrei-sakharov/>

⁷ <http://freakonomics.com/2011/04/07/quotes-uncovered-how-lies-travel/>

language is poetic, analogical and metaphorical however, and we should not demand of scripture strict scientific accuracy. We don't need to.

For example, we all say the sun comes up in the morning, even though we know that's not strictly true; the earth spins and gives us the *impression* that the sun comes up and goes down. Speaking as we *experience* the sun rather than with scientific precision in no way discredits the accuracy of the statement. Scripture is no different. It's fun to study the Bible and discover how very accurate it is, but there's no time for that today, so let's just stick with our simple definition: truth is that which corresponds to, or accurately describes reality.

Our culture has lost confidence in the truth. I think this is a direct consequence of rejecting God. Most people no longer believe that objective truth exists. Instead our culture worships autonomy, the right to make our own decisions about everything, even defining truth for ourselves.

We are told that truth is "socially constructed" and has no reality apart from the society we live in. If we lived in a different society we would have a different "truth." We therefore have the right to construct our own reality, according to our deepest desires. When I was exploring New Age spirituality thirty years ago, this was the teaching: you create your own reality with your thoughts. Then it was fringe; now it is mainstream. We actually think we can create the reality we want.

This idea is not only an expression of how far from reality our pride will take us, it is especially poisonous to young people. It's exhausting having to create yourself and your reality all the time, especially when you are young. A young person's task of forming his or her identity in *accordance* with reality is hard enough. When they try to *create* reality to suit their desires, reality is usually not very cooperative with the attempt. When the attempt fails as it must, they are lost. Anger, depression, and anxiety set in.

In living as autonomous little gods, imagining we have the power to create a new and better reality for ourselves simply by *thinking* it into existence, we not only discover that we don't have that power at all, but we also become disconnected from others, profoundly alone in our personally created reality bubbles, cut off from others in *their* own reality bubbles, spinning alone, lost in an indifferent universe. This is a recipe for despair. We need deep connection with God and with each other, but this view of the world makes both impossible. No wonder suicide is at an all-time high. A few go the other way and commit mass murder. Others try to numb their confusion and pain in alcohol or drugs or porn.

Many Christians even seem to be losing confidence in the truth, taking their cues from culture and their own desires rather than God's Word. We see this in the push to re-interpret the Bible to suit current cultural trends, in the focus on experience and emotion in church rather than God's Word, and in recent apostasies by well-known believers such as Josh Harris. People, we are in trouble, and it's not just those people "out there." It's us, in here. We need to examine ourselves and ask, do I believe that truth exists? And do I love the truth?

A Shocking Discovery: People prefer Lies to Truth

I learned this when I was a stockbroker thirty-five years ago: people love sweet lies rather than unpleasant truth. I naively thought that people would appreciate an honest investment advisor (me), who would tell them the truth: invest long term, don't be greedy. Given the poor reputation of stockbrokers, I thought I would be rewarded with success for my honesty.

That's not what happened. The most successful brokers were the biggest liars. I sat next to a broker who I heard lie repeatedly to his clients (you know, the one I told you about last night, the one with the dreamy blue eyes). I called him on it, but he retorted, "They WANT me to lie to them." At the time I didn't believe him. But he was right.

Years later I read about this in Romans 1:18: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." Our unredeemed bent is to suppress the truth, especially when it conflicts with something we want. We really do prefer to believe lies. This explains a lot. Do *you* love the truth? If you don't, you are vulnerable to more deception than you could possibly imagine. As Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, **because they refused to love the truth and so be saved**. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (v. 9-12)

There's no neutrality around truth. Those who do not love the truth will eventually become convinced of what is false, unable to recognize truth at all.

But loving the truth is not enough. We must also cultivate courage. Why?

Courage Required

If you love the truth you become a threat to others who don't love the truth and who may experience your commitment to truth as judgement of them. You also become a threat to unjust authority, because when the truth controls you, nobody else can.

You also need courage because once you know the truth about something, you become responsible to act on what you know. That means saying and doing things that could get you in trouble. Fear causes many people to close their minds, because they sense that it could cost them. Loving the truth is not for sissies. But joy cannot exist when fear controls us.

The need for courage applies in so many ways, from telling the truth that will get us in trouble when a lie would help us escape it, to facing up to our own sin and repenting of it, to changing our views when we learn we have been wrong, to standing up for what is right but unpopular.

Courage will be needed even more as our culture moves farther from God, because Christians are becoming increasingly unpopular. We are going to have to make some hard decisions. If we stand with the Lord and the truth, we could lose jobs, businesses, reputation, friends, perhaps be fined or imprisoned. Some of this is already happening. We will certainly all face ridicule.

Modern evangelicalism, a broad term that doesn't tell us much, but it's the closest term I know to describe the general swath of Protestant churches that affirm the Bible as the true and living and authoritative Word of God, has largely failed to train their people that while salvation is a free gift, faith in Christ demands courage. As a result, some are unprepared for the cost required and lose confidence in the truth, leading them to re-interpret scripture to fit cultural demands, or even to leave the faith altogether.

Giving in to these demands will not help those who are demanding it, nor will it satisfy them. When they get what they want and find it doesn't help, they will issue new demands. Sin is predatory; it always wants more. Churches that capitulate will die, just as mainline Protestant churches have already died. Why? They lost confidence in the divine authority of scripture, becoming empty shells.

Perhaps this is why in scripture cowardice is seen as wicked. We tend to feel compassionate toward fearful people. I do, because I am so often fearful. We don't think of fear as sin. But we are called to fear God, not men. Revelation 21:8 puts this sin at the beginning of the list of sins that will consign a person to God's judgement: "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

It seems that God is serious about courage.

How do we get courage? By asking God for it, then by doing the things that frighten us, trusting God will be with us. And he will. Before Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, God told him, repeating it three times, to "be strong and very courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7).

Esther is remembered for her courage. Wicked Haman was executing a plot to wipe out the Jews, her people. She needed to inform the king, but to go to him without being summoned risked immediate execution. At first she hesitated, but her Uncle Mordecai challenged her, "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). So she answered Mordecai: "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (4:15). That's courage.

Daniel Chapter 3 gives us a powerful picture of this. When the Jewish captives Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace because they would not worship the Babylonian image of gold, what happened? One “like a son of God” was seen with them in the fire. They were not burned, and not even their hair was singed. This makes me think of Jesus saying that even the hairs of our head are numbered by God!

The young men didn’t know that would happen, but they declared: “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:17-18).

When they stood with the Lord, the Son of God came to be with them in the fire. At least I believe that it was a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

Courage means setting your face like flint and holding fast to the truth no matter what it costs you and how much your knees are knocking. Courage is doing what is right even when you are scared. It is the only way to live, because giving in to our fears results in a kind of living death and ever more increasing fear. Are you cultivating courage and teaching your kids to do it? Without courage, they will walk away from Christ; they will be swept away by the cultural deluge of lies. Courage is like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger and braver you become. Love the truth, face your fears, trust that God is with you, do what scares you, and live!

If courage is a prerequisite to knowing and loving the truth, knowing and loving the truth is a prerequisite to joy.

Truth: Prerequisite to Joy

All of this sounds so heavy. What does it have to do with happiness? Because you cannot be happy living in lies and hiding in fear. Only truth brings peace and joy. Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). The truth sets us free, and only free people can be happy.

We must love the truth above all things, binding ourselves to it and refusing to abandon it no matter what. Truth is the foundation of a joyful life. We are designed to know and delight in the truth; there is pleasure in discovering and enjoying truth. And that is why there is great joy in believing the gospel, which is a true message from God.

The Gospel is a True Message from God

Contrary to popular opinion, truth is objective: it exists whether we believe it or not. This is obvious when it comes to facts about the material world. But spiritual truth is as real as any scientific truth. People can decide to ignore the law of gravity, but if they jump off a cliff, the law will still operate. Spiritual truth is the same. You may reject it, but you are still subject to it.

An unbelieving friend of mine once asked me, what would I do if I learned that Christ was not raised? Perhaps his body was found and conclusively identified. I told him I would abandon the faith, of course. He told me this comforted him. Why? Because most unbelievers think that our faith is just wish fulfillment. That faith is opposed to facts and reason. Even some Christians think that you prove your faith by believing apart from facts and reason. Yet the claims of Christ are grounded in history, in actual events testified to by eye witnesses. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1Cor. 15:3-8)

This letter was written within twenty years of the Resurrection, and there were still people alive who could confirm or deny this report. Paul was claiming these events as factual. Did Paul ever say anything about Christianity being “a relationship, not a religion?” Anything about asking Jesus into your heart? No, he did not. Rather, Paul said it is of *first importance* to know that Christ died for our sins and was raised, according to the prophecies of scripture.

This may be hard to hear, but please think with me: by adopting the “relationship not religion” idea, evangelicals admirably wanted to distinguish a living faith from dry external church-going and legalistic morality. But this distorts the gospel. The Good News is first a true message that comes to us from outside of us. By making relationship “of first importance” rather than the message itself, we devalue not only the message, but scripture, and by the way conveniently keep the focus on ourselves, the way we like it (*my* relationship with God becomes primary, not the good news of Jesus Christ). We have so many ways to turn the spotlight on ourselves. That is the sin we must be on the lookout for and put to death.

Many prefer to seek inner guidance and fresh revelation from God, rather than going to the mediating Word given to us. Direct revelation is so much more exciting! The Holy Spirit does guide us, but the usual way He does this is by illuminating the scriptures so that we can understand them. Famous theologian B.B. Warfield warned, “He who begins by seeking God within himself may end by confusing himself with God.”⁸ If you want to hear from God, read his Word. Hebrews 4:12 says, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Go to the Word, and you can be sure you are hearing from God.

⁸ <https://www.the-highway.com/articleJuly18.html>

The gospel does involve a personal relationship with Jesus, but it is more than that, and it does not begin with that. It begins with believing a truth claim about events in history. Later in the chapter Paul says, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ...and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1Cor15:14-17). In other words, if Christ was not raised, we are wasting our time. It is the central fact on which our entire faith hangs.

If you have doubts about the resurrection, or about the accuracy of scripture, please research it. Study apologetics. Never has it been easier to get answers to our questions. We won't be able to get answers to all of our questions, but we can get answers enough to weigh the evidence and make a decision about what we believe to be true based on that evidence.

Once I became convinced that the resurrection really happened, the rest was simple. As I like to say, if a guy comes back from the dead, I'm pretty much going to believe whatever *he* says. I love reviewing the evidence because...it makes me happy! In a world that maintains such things didn't happen and couldn't have happened, reviewing the evidence reminds me that they *did* happen and because they did, I have a future and a hope. What happy news

Believing and obeying the gospel means this:

You Must Choose Sides

The cultural forces of “tolerance” demand that we accept everything without question. My truth is my truth and your truth is your truth. Except that's not true. It's a lie. The shock troops of cultural “tolerance” are anything but tolerant. They have chosen sides, and so must we. Neutrality is a myth. So is co-existence. They do not intend to allow us to co-exist with them. We are targets for destruction. Therefore, we must choose whom we will serve.

Rosaria Butterfield chose sides when she left her very pleasant life as a lesbian and beloved college professor to embrace Christ. In her book, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, she writes that she lost everything but the dog. How did her conversion happen? It's a long story, but in addition to a surprising friendship with a pastor who invited her to ask him questions, the bottom line is that she read scripture, at first to debunk it, but over time, she said, the Word of God became bigger inside of her than anything else, leading her to repentance and faith. The Word of God is powerful because it is true. She chose sides, or rather, she changed sides. We must do the same. Trusting in Christ ruins your life, but in the best possible way. What do we get in return? Joy unspeakable, and full of glory.

We see this reluctance to side with the truth exemplified in Pontius Pilate.

Jesus told Pilate: “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37).

Pilate responded: “What is truth?” He would have fit right in to our culture. Ironically, THE truth was standing right in front of him, and he missed it.

But if you are of the truth, that is, if you love the truth, you will listen to the voice of Jesus.

Being a Christian is not so much about being moral (although it is that), but about choosing sides. Christ demands that we to be loyal to him above all things. We cannot add him *to* our life. He must *become* our life.

Once you commit your life to Christ who is the truth, that is the beginning of your real life and your real happiness, which will only grow the more you know him. Have you done that? Have you thrown in with Jesus, no matter what? If you have, how blessed you are! Your life becomes a wonderful adventure. Your destiny is assured, and along the way, everything has meaning, everything has purpose.

But it will cost you. It’s different for everyone, but everyone who follows Christ will experience pain and loss because of their loyalty to Him. Some will disapprove of you, and some may even hate you. It could be members of your own family. But what you lose will be far surpassed by what you gain. Jesus told his disciples:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

To be a disciple of Christ is to pay a price. But whatever we lose for his sake, we will receive much more, both now, and in the age to come. If we lose family or friends, we will receive more true family, the family of God, and eternal life. I have experienced this in my own life, and painful as it can be, it is a pretty wonderful trade.

Another reason people need courage to choose sides is that Christianity is weird.

Keep Christianity Weird

Can we talk? Christianity is strange. Really strange. If you don’t find it strange, perhaps it’s because you were raised in the faith and so you are used to it. If you haven’t found our faith to be strange, maybe you haven’t really understood it. Or maybe we all secretly think so but don’t want to be the first to say it. So let’s take a step back and notice how very odd the gospel is, and the Bible itself, both the Old and New Testaments.

When I was first converted to Christianity, having been made alive by the Holy Spirit, somehow I just knew it was true, but I still found it incredibly weird. How is it that this guy thousands of years ago in an obscure little country, dying horrible death on a Roman cross could pay for *my*

sins? And why would the Father put his Son through such a thing? Then I learned that this same Jesus created the world. The Trinity itself is strange: three persons, one God?

And what about original sin? I was born sinful but somehow it's still my fault. How does that work? And what about Adam and Eve, and the forbidden fruit? Wouldn't God know they would fall for it, and therefore God set them up to fail? And what's this with a talking serpent? Is it poetic or literal?

And what about hell? Hell is not just for the worst criminals but the destination of all who refuse to love the truth. That includes many of our loved ones. When my mom died in unbelief, it nearly broke me. I am still the only believer in my immediate family, except for my two children.

It is painful beyond measure to think of their possible destiny. But "The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," says the psalmist (Psalm 19:9). Much of our resistance to hard teachings comes from thinking too highly of ourselves and not highly enough of God. Romans 9, that great chapter on the sovereignty of God, which we will tackle next session, says, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" (Romans 9:20-21). How absurd for the clay to complain to the potter! Doesn't God have the right to do as he pleases with his creatures? We are in no position to pass judgement on God. But before we can find comfort and joy in the sovereignty of God, we must love the truth above all things, even if it is really, really strange.

Christian writer Flannery O'Connor wrote: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd."⁹ Jesus knew that we would be considered strange if we followed him. He said: "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).

When we feel embarrassed by our faith, remember that Jesus knew this would happen. He doesn't coddle us though. He tells us to fear something worse than being embarrassed by men: fear that God would be embarrassed of us.

Embarrassment can tempt us to re-interpret scripture to suit others, to make it a little less strange, more palatable to outsiders or even ourselves. We can be drawn to false teachers who twist scripture to make us less uncomfortable and embarrassed. Their teaching is often mostly true, with just a little twist.

Satan deceived Eve by God's Word, but added a little twist that injected doubt. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). That's not what God said. God told Adam: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Genesis

⁹<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/48482-you-shall-know-the-truth-and-the-truth-shall-make>

2:16). God did not say to avoid every tree in the garden. He gave them everything in the garden to enjoy freely. Only one tree was forbidden.

But Satan made God out to be stingy, insinuating, “God doesn’t want you to be happy, that’s why he is restricting you from fulfilling your desires.” Today there are people in the church as well as outside of it that are doing the same thing. They make fulfilling one’s desires the most important thing, teaching that a loving God would not thwart your deepest desires.

But in fact our whole walk with Christ involves daily repentance, putting to death ungodly desires, because they are wrong and harmful and, as church father Augustine wrote, disordered.¹⁰ We love lesser things too much, and greater things too little. Growing in Christ means killing sin and putting our desires back in proper order. God requires this of us not because he is stingy and mean, but because he is loving and good.

Satan tried to deceive Jesus in the same way, when he was in the wilderness, by twisting God’s Word. For example Satan said, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down (from the temple), for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone’ “ (Matthew 4:6). Jesus fought this temptation with the true Word of God, in full context. He replied, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Deuteronomy 6:16). Thankfully for us, Jesus, the second Adam, passed the test.

Satan cherry-picked scripture and twisted it. He failed because Jesus knew the whole counsel of God and could accurately apply it. False teachers today are Satan’s tools. They offer us a steaming pan of fresh baked brownies, with just a little bit of dog poop mixed in. It’s only a little dog poop. Would you eat them anyway?

Or think of two parallel lines. One line is, let’s say, the Word of God. The other one is you, following the Word of God and staying in line with it. But what if you angle off just a little bit into error? At first it is very close to the first line, and you might think, there’s no real problem here. But then, watch that line. Before long you are far, far away from the original line.

Our defense is to know all of God’s word, and that takes time and effort and sitting under godly teaching. I don’t want to suggest it is simple or easy. It is not always clear how to interpret the Bible and how to apply its teachings, especially to today’s cultural challenges. But there are basic doctrines Christians have always believed, and we have a duty to learn them and understand them. Our goal needs to be to stay faithful to scripture and seek to understand it *as written*, and not to let cultural disapproval tempt us to water it down or re-interpret its *clear* teachings.

Up north they like to say, “Keep Portland Weird.” I say, “Keep Christianity Weird.”

¹⁰ <http://www.brianghedges.com/2013/09/saint-augustine-on-rightly-ordered-love.html>

One common line of attack, since Christianity *is* strange, is to relegate it to the realm of subjective belief, not accurate knowledge. People will say, “You have faith, but I have facts.” Not so fast.

Everybody lives by Faith: the power of world view¹¹

Most people, even some Christians, think that faith is entirely subjective. They see it as personal preference that can help people feel better, but that has no objective reality. Only *science* tells us what is real.

But wait. *Everybody* lives by faith in something or someone. It’s impossible not to. The atheist has faith in science perhaps, or whatever seems right to him. He can’t *not* have faith. That’s because we are limited beings and have limited knowledge about reality. In fact we must *begin* with faith: some *belief* about the structure of reality. You can’t reason your way *to* that belief, although you can see whether reason and experience confirms it or results in contradictions. You can’t even think without first believing something about reality and how it works. You reason *from* that prior faith commitment. We call this prior faith commitment worldview.

Because this is a faith commitment that comes before anything else, we cannot persuade someone with a competing worldview to interpret reality according to biblical principles. Even if you show them that these principles correspond to reality far better than their view does, they will remain unmoved, because *their* faith-based worldview does not allow that interpretation.

This is why people can have the same facts but interpret them completely differently. We interpret every fact that we observe through our world view, which functions as a mental map through which we sift every perception and give it meaning. For example, a believer looks at swirling galaxies in space and sees the glory of God in creation, marveling at how big our God must be to create this massive and beautiful universe. An atheist may look at the same galaxies and be awed by the same beauty, but according to his worldview it shows only our insignificance in an indifferent universe. Same facts; different interpretation.

Or, to the pro-life person who sees God as the author of life, abortion is child killing, destroying a precious human being created by God. To the pro-choice person, abortion is eliminating a parasite, a non-person, a meaningless blob of protoplasm and an outright threat to the woman who doesn’t want to be pregnant. Same facts, different world views.

But all world views cannot be true. The nature of reality is not a matter of personal preference. And it turns out that only the Christian world view is big enough to account for all of reality, because it begins with God, who is outside of creation. All other world views elevate something *within* creation to god-like status as ultimate reality. Anything within creation elevated to

¹¹ I am indebted to Nancy Pearcey for the ideas in the next two sections on worldview; in particular *Total Truth* and *Finding Truth*.

ultimate reality will be too small to account for everything, and will always contradict itself at some point.

For example, if the person believes that matter is all there is, then he can't explain non-material realities. Where is freedom? An illusion. Matter is operated on by physical laws, so it has no freedom. Where is love? Another illusion. Hormones or brain chemicals to assure reproduction. Neither is there morality, because matter isn't good or evil, it is only what is. But nobody can live that way. So materialists have to smuggle in moral ideas that are not supported by their own world view. And that means they live in conflict with themselves. Only the Christian world view is big enough to account for all of reality in a coherent way.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Christianity claims to give an account of facts – to tell you what the universe is really like."¹² It turns out that it is the only world view that doesn't contradict itself at any point. Two excellent books explain these ideas in more detail, both by Nancy Pearcey, and both at the book table. *Total Truth* shows how the Christian world view is total truth about all of reality, and *Finding Truth* compares the biblical world view with other world views, showing where they are correct and where they fail. So don't be intimidated when you are mocked for living by faith. *Everybody* has faith in *something* that explains reality. Only the *Christian* faith can account for *all* of reality.

Not only does everyone live by faith, but everybody worships something.

Everybody Worships: Two Choices

We have two choices: we either worship the living God who created the heavens and the earth, or we worship some aspect of creation.

Worship, or "worth-ship," is that to which we ascribe most worth to in our lives. Some people worship nature. Or perhaps their spouse or children. Or their career. Or a sports team or celebrity or even their church. Everybody to some extent worships themselves. We are the heroes of our own story and naturally think everything around us exists to display the glory of me, myself, and I. That is the essence of sin. That is what we must kill. But it's impossible not to worship. The thing we worship is that which is most valuable to us, the thing we love most, the thing that would most devastate us if we lost it.

My first object of worship (aside from myself), was my first love. I esteemed him, meditated on him, dreamed of him, spent as much time as I could with him. For awhile I was over the moon with happiness. I had never experienced such joy before. Falling in love does that to you. It makes you giddy. I gave him my heart and body and all of my trust and faith, and it seemed to work, right up until he dumped me.

¹² https://alor.org/Storage/Library/PDF/Lewis CS - God_in_the_Dock.pdf (54)

It turned out I was worshiping a false god. It matters what you worship. It is the most important issue of our lives. Worshiping an idol can seem to work for a long time, right until it doesn't. What's sobering is that we all, even Christians, make idols of things we desire and love, and we can deceive ourselves. It's very difficult to see our idols until they fail us.

What is it that matters most of all to you? That thing which, if you lost it, life would not be worth living anymore? Is it your children? Your spouse? Boyfriend? Your career? Or is it Christ?

Jesus is the Truth, and He is God

The Bible tells us there is a truth that stands outside of us, an objective reality that we are expected to recognize and submit to. Ultimately, the truth is a Person, Jesus Christ. He said of himself, "I am THE WAY, THE TRUTH, and THE LIFE" (John 14:6). We aren't allowed to re-invent him to suit ourselves. We can't say, "My Jesus would not do thus and such." We need to discover the real Jesus as revealed in scripture.

God does not accept us on *our* terms. We must come to him on *his* terms. When I was searching for God, I wanted him to prove his existence to me, and then I would decide whether I would obey him. He did not oblige. He remained silent. Romans 11:22 says: "Consider the kindness and sternness of God." God's sternness *was* his kindness to me, because it led me to repentance.

Jesus said: "Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own" (John 7:17 NLT). Until we are willing to do the will of God, we will not be able to know whether Christ's teaching is from God, that is, whether it is true. I experienced this in my own life. Only when I was finally willing to do God's will did he reveal himself to me.

That's the secret. If you aren't willing to obey with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, God will not reveal himself to you. What if you aren't willing and you know it? Or at least part of you wants to surrender and part of you does not want to at all? Ask God to make you willing! Ask him to give you a new heart that wants to do his will. Tell him that you are willing to be made willing. And then wait. This is a prayer that God loves to answer, though for reasons he does not disclose to us it can be a long wait. But as Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (John 4:23-24). Notice: it is the Father who is doing the seeking. If you recognize that you are not willing as you ought to be, but you want to be different, that's evidence the Father is seeking you. Jesus also said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). The Greek

tense means keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.¹³ Wait on the Lord until he comes. Don't give up.

If you want to be happy, love the truth above all things, and love Jesus, who is the Truth.

But where do we find the truth? Everywhere, actually!

God's Word: God's true and infallible Revelation

Christians have always recognized two "books" of revelation, or truth: nature and the Bible.

The beauty and order of creation points to God. Romans 1:20 tells us that God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." We study creation to learn its secrets. Christians, by the way, founded modern science and invented the scientific method. They believed in a world governed by God whose laws could be discerned. (Nancy Pearcey's *Soul of Science* explains this.)

However, the only *infallible* source of truth about who God is and what he requires of us is revealed in scripture. The Bible gives us the very words of God. Much of it wonderful and glorious, full of hope and joy. Yet some of it is very unsettling. Upsetting even. But if it seems wrong, it's only because we are wrong. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." *All scripture*. Jesus validated the Old Testament, and the New Testament was validated by the eyewitnesses of his life, death, and resurrection, the testimony and teaching of the apostles, and Paul.

A disciple is a learner. If you are a disciple of the Lord, if you love the truth, then commit to reading the Word daily. It's shocking how few Christians do this. Of believers who attend church every week, how many do you think read the Bible daily? Only about a third! That's the *active* believers: Two thirds don't read scripture during the week.¹⁴ This ought not to be! No wonder the church is so often weak and deceived!

Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31). How can we abide in his word if we don't know it? The Bible is our bread from heaven, our spiritual food. Jesus told the devil "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). We so quickly forget what we know. The visible world seems so much more real to us than the invisible one. If we don't feed on the Word regularly, we become weak and may drift away altogether.

¹³ <https://www.revisedenglishversion.com/Matthew/chapter7/7>

¹⁴ <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/07/02/few-protestant-churchgoers-read-the-bible-daily/>

Daily reading sets up our mind and heart to be attuned to God for the day, and it nourishes our souls over a lifetime. I recommend doing it in the morning, before your day gets going. The Israelites received manna in the morning. Jesus, who called himself the true bread from heaven¹⁵, is our manna. He himself got up early to commune with the Father. If you have small children, you can train them to stay in their rooms until you are finished. Or get up earlier.

I understand it's difficult, especially if you must go to work in the morning, but you need to create a habit. You brush your teeth every day, don't you? Surely God's Word is more important? Start small, with something you think you will actually do. Maybe fifteen minutes to start. Then try twenty, then thirty. More if you can.

Give God the first fruits of your day, just as the Israelites gave God the first and best fruits of their harvest for the sacrifice. Read scripture, and pray. We have the very words of God! Let's read them, take them to heart, abide in them. Jesus said, "If you love me you will do what I command" (John 14:15). How do we know what he commands? By reading scripture. Romans 8:29 tells us that we were "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." How does this happen? Primarily by feeding on the Word of God; little by little our hearts are formed to be like Christ.

This is not legalism, it is faithfulness. The Bible gives up its secrets over a lifetime of reading. I understand so much more than I did when I began. Many things that seemed wrong to me before now make perfect sense. There are still things I do not understand. Discovering the mind of God is a lifelong adventure.

Also, read God's word because it gives us joy!

Doctrine leads to Doxology

Doctrine has a bad reputation as boring, but it's not true. When I read the Word, my heart leaps for joy! How amazing is this God of love and grace! How can I not be happy with such a God! Doctrine leads to Doxology. In other words, considering God's truths revealed in scripture leads to joyful praise. If it doesn't, we haven't understood it.

That's also why I love apologetics, the rational defense of the faith. As it strengthens me in the truth, it gives me joy.

And why I love thinking through the issues of life with a biblical world view. Applying scripture to life gives accurate and wise conclusions about reality, and this gives me joy. Does discovering some new insight you never saw before give you joy? Does seeing old truths that you have forgotten give you joy?

¹⁵ John 6

The human mind is designed to seek knowledge and understanding. We love knowing. We love discovering harmony and order. Recognition of truth causes a spark of joy in the soul. To be happy, seek truth and enjoy it.

Questions are Key

This brings me to my final point: the importance of asking questions.

Let me start with something that happened to me a couple of years ago. I was subbing in a middle school social studies class, and we were discussing a CNN news program that the teacher wanted us to watch. Per the teacher's instructions, I asked the students if any of them had any questions they wanted to ask. Various questions were raised about the news stories, until one student raised his hand and asked this: "I want to know why I exist. Why does anything exist at all?"

Wow. What a profound and philosophical question! This kid had more important things on his mind than the news. I had to think quickly, what am I allowed to say? (It was public school.) I don't think well on my feet but I took a stab at it. I told him, "You exist because God wanted you to be here." Then I changed the subject before I got in trouble. I hoped he would think about God as the reason anything exists at all, including him. This young man, just thirteen, was already asking questions about the deep things of life.

We are not meant to live passively, taking in everything that comes our way. Questions are so important. Don't ever be afraid to ask questions. Wonder about things. What does it mean? Is it true? Where is God in this? And how then shall I live? Questions are how we think. If you aren't asking questions, you may be just drifting through your life. Thinking requires energy and we tend to resist it because it takes effort. Learn to love thinking.

Just because you read or hear something on the news or in a book, it doesn't mean you have to accept it. Think about it first. Compare it to scripture. Ask questions about it. Only scripture is infallibly true. Compare everything against God's Word. That is our north star by which we understand everything else.

But even scripture requires thought and prayer to implement. The Bible doesn't give us step by step instructions on how to do things. We must each work out our own salvation.

This is where we can get in trouble. Over the years I have seen a number of teachers and authors gain a great following of people eager to follow their programs, and years later we learned of damage caused, of support groups even set up for people to share how they were harmed.

The most recent heartbreak is Josh Harris, who wrote *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, about courtship as a model for finding a mate. Many believers jumped on it as a solution to protect their children and find a good match for them. Somehow it all went wrong: legions of kids raised this

way have said “purity culture” messed them up. Josh first apologized (I felt he was unfairly blamed, but I admired his humility). But now he not only has rejected his own book, he has divorced his wife and abandoned the faith. Worse, the biblical ethic of sexual fidelity has been discredited in its wake. What a tragedy.

As far as I know Josh is not guilty of anything than writing a book when he was only twenty-one. Could part of the reason for the backlash be that those who implemented his ideas were driven by fear more than faith? I don’t know. But I think those who took his ideas and made them a set of rules and requirements are perhaps more responsible than he. Instead of using Josh’s book as guidance and thinking it through for *their* situation, they elevated it and him to idol status, and it failed.

So be careful. Don’t make an idol of an authority, even a biblical authority. Only scripture is infallible. When we trust in a method or a person rather than the Holy Spirit, we can cause harm, because we are making an idol of them rather than looking to the Lord. Life is complex. There are no guarantees or easy answers. But if we look to God and seek his will and wisdom, he will help us and promises to make everything, even our mistakes, work out in the long run for our good and his glory.

Ask Him questions too! What should I do? Where am I wrong here? What are my blind spots? How do I love that hard to love person in my life? How can I glorify you in this situation? And trust that he will show you. Yes, seek counsel, read books, but take them as guidance, not marching orders. Pray for wisdom to apply it in your situation. James teaches us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). Wisdom is applied truth for living, and that is a skill that is developed over time. And, in praying and seeking how to apply God’s truth to our lives, we develop that cherished relationship with the Lord.

The quality of your life depends upon the quality of the questions you ask.¹⁶ I first heard this in a presentation by classical educator Andrew Kern, and I’ve been pondering it ever since. How happy I was to find the exact same question asked by Mike Mason in *Champagne for the Soul*.¹⁷ (It’s that important. Ask questions, the kind of questions that matter. And remember that truth has nothing to fear from honest questions. Which leads us to....

Dealing with Doubt

Recently Marty Sampson, author of the Hillsong hit “Oceans,” has abandoned the faith, in large part because his doubts overcame his belief, or so he said. He wrote in part:

How many preachers fall? Many. No one talks about it. How many miracles

¹⁶ <https://www.circeinstitute.org/media/audio/contemplation-nature>

¹⁷ Mike Mason. (2007). *Champagne for the Soul: Rediscovering God’s Gift of Joy*. Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing. (179)

happen? Not many. No one talks about it. Why is the Bible full of contradictions? No one talks about it. How can God be love yet send 4 billion people to a place, all coz they don't believe? No one talks about it. Christians can be the most judgmental people on the planet-they can also be some of the most beautiful and loving people...but it's not for me. I am not in anymore. I want genuine truth. Not the "I just believe it" kind of truth.¹⁸

He seems to have thought that faith is like a magic talisman or a mantra: to battle doubt you repeat over and over "I believe," as if that will make it so. That's not faith. That's magical thinking. It's a Christianized version of trying to create your own reality. There are answers to many of his doubts. Why didn't he seek them out?

Other recent well-known evangelicals who have left orthodoxy, such as Jen Hatmaker, have expressed something similar, that growing up they were discouraged from asking questions, that they were taught that asking questions shows a lack of faith, or is even sinful.¹⁹ This is so wrong! To not ask questions means you are not allowed to think. But God said, "Come, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). We are called to love God with our minds (Matthew 22:37). We *must* ask questions, and God wants us to.

We can feel guilty for experiencing doubt. But as one writer put it, doubt is simply "feeling the force of an objection."²⁰ Don't let it scare you or make you feel guilty, but face it head on.

If someone doesn't seek answers, perhaps it is a sinful doubt that is not looking for truth, but for a way out. But faithful doubt is part of the normal Christian life. Doubt is actually an important way we grow.

Life challenges us with other ideas, with people who behave in disappointing or hurtful or confusing ways, with experiences that don't line up with what we thought we knew.

Ask questions of your doubt. In other words: use questions to doubt your doubt. And while you are wrestling, keep trusting and relying on God to direct your steps. Turn toward him, not away from him.

Being finite beings, we can't know everything we want to know, but we can know enough to entrust ourselves to God. Whatever the source of your doubt, let it drive you into deeper understanding and faith, not by avoiding it, but by seeking answers to your questions.²¹¹⁴

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/kristiansarate/status/1160411900674367488>

¹⁹ <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/e/episode-34-jen-hatmaker/>

²⁰ <https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-can-doubt-and-have-faith-without-exploding/print>

²¹ <https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-can-doubt-and-have-faith-without-exploding/print>

Summary

We've covered a lot of ground here. To summarize, if you want to be happy you must first love truth above all things. To love the truth means to be willing to submit to it. When we are willing to obey the truth, then we are able to understand the truth, and that understanding gives us joy.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus,

Thank you for revealing truth to us, the truth that makes us free and gives us joy.

Make us people who love your truth above all things, and are eager to obey you, because you *are* the truth.

Help us to develop a world view based on your Word that we may see clearly,

And make us brave to stand with you whatever the cost.

For you make known to us the path of life,

And in your presence is fullness of joy.

Amen.