

1. A Mother who is Happy

Lisa Harper

Lisa Harper is an American writer and Christian speaker who recently published a book called *The Sacrament of Happy*. The amazing thing is that she has every reason not to be happy. In her early life, Lisa was traumatised by her parents' ugly divorce. Her father was a changeable man with a temper. In late childhood, she was molested by multiple men connected with her family. A child psychologist once told her mother, 'Lisa is either the most happy, well-adjusted child I've ever met in my life, or she is in deep emotional pain' – and her mother went around boasting to everyone that Lisa was incredibly happy and well-adjusted!¹ These terrible experiences marred the Baptist upbringing Lisa received, and yet she remained with the Lord and sought to glorify Him with her life. Eventually, the strain of serving while still struggling to process all that trauma stopped her in her tracks, and she had a panic attack while leading a women's Bible study.

1. Lisa Harper, *The Sacrament of Happy: What a Smiling God Brings to a Wounded World*, (B&H Publishing Group: Nashville, 2017), p. 8.

... I got into my car, called a therapist, and made the first appointment of what turned into almost a decade of digging. When you've become a master faker like I had, the truth gets buried pretty deep. While I believe that all of life's answers can be found in God's Word, I've realized I often need the help of those wiser than me to find them and apply them to the most wounded places of my heart. Sometimes we need triage before we can get back up and fight the good fight. Before we can actually participate in the fulness of joy instead of just pretending we're happy.²

Therapy eventually helped Lisa to move on with her life, and, as she passed child-bearing age, she started to seek the Lord as to whether she might adopt a child. She asked three Christian friends to pray for her in that decision. Two were willing to do so and encouraged her, but the third felt Lisa was still too damaged from her past and should settle for another dog. It was another five years before Lisa felt 'whole' enough to pursue adoption – and she knew she wanted a child who wouldn't have much of a chance at being chosen by a regular two-parent family. After two heartbreaking failed attempts to adopt, Lisa met Missy, an HIV-positive toddler with a grocery list of further medical problems, and fell in love with her, so much so that she decided she would move to Haiti to be with her if that was the only route open. In her book, Lisa talks about the secret to her overwhelming happiness:

Because I'm fifty-three and single, I often teasingly say, 'My husband is lost and won't stop to ask for directions.' But the truth of the matter is that the main reason I'm single is

2. Ibid, p.5.

because I was very broken and foolish in my twenties and thirties. Most of the men I was attracted to were abusive in some way – largely because of childhood trauma and sexual abuse, destructive personal relationships were my default setting for decades – so God protected me from them. And the few kind, Christian men I dated for any length of time, God protected from me because I was such a romantic train wreck. It took me a really long time to recognize and admit I needed deep emotional healing, and by that time not only had I squandered the typical matrimony years of young adulthood, but I'd almost missed the biological window of motherhood ... I do believe there are consequences to sin, and the consequence of my relational toxicity was that I never trusted a man enough to marry him and never got to experience the miracle of pregnancy. So the fact that God not only withheld His anger over my fear and foolishness but also restored to me the years I'd allowed 'locusts' to devour (Joel 2:25) by allowing me to become Missy's mom when I was fifty years old has left me intoxicated with gratitude.³

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For his anger is but for a moment, and his favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5).

I remember a couple of years ago, when I had only two children and they were both toddlers, saying to a friend, 'I love being a mum, but I don't love being a stay-at-home mom.' That might have been a fair comment – we're not all cut out to live the same lifestyle – but I'm not sure it was quite true. I'm not sure I loved being a mum at all.

3. Ibid, pp. 136-137.

When I was a child we had a grumpy, bedraggled-looking poodle mix called Lady. Lady had two litters of six puppies each, and I remember the sight of her, irritable and sore, trying to slink away from her offspring even as they tried to feed from her, dragging them along on their stumbling little paws and ignoring their whines. *Lady's a bad mother*, I remember thinking. *She just wants to get away from her puppies all the time. She doesn't even love them!*

Fast-forward twenty years, and there I was daily trying to carve out even minutes away from my own children. Well, it didn't start out that way. At one time that attitude was unimaginable.

Happiness through Childlessness

I could never go into the infertility ward of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary without bursting into tears at some point, and from that moment on I would be basically unable to say anything intelligible. What made it worse is that the infertility unit was actually connected to the delivery unit, which meant that you would see huge-bellied mothers about to meet their new baby everywhere you looked, and then you would go into a doctor's office to hear about a terrifying range of needles you would be expected to employ on your own for weeks to have even a chance of a pregnancy. It was a particularly dark time, making the decision whether IVF was for us, and eventually I prayed to the Lord that although I didn't want to go through with it, I had to leave this decision in His hands: if we didn't conceive naturally by a certain date, after a planned holiday, we would go ahead. A number of miracles later, we found out

we were pregnant – the day before I was to call the clinic and set up the treatment.

I know a great many women who have experienced infertility. Some have gone on to have children, some also under miraculous circumstances. Some have not, but have gone on faithfully loving and serving the Lord anyway. Some have had miscarriages or infant loss. I also know many who would love to be mothers but have never had a long-term relationship, much less met the man they wanted to raise a family with.

In the years we endured our struggle, the least helpful thing people said to me was, ‘Don’t worry, it’ll happen. You just have to relax.’ Because, of course, they didn’t know that. They didn’t know the plan God had for our lives. And we don’t need to give infertile (or single, or grieving) women false hope – because we have true hope.

Last Christmas, it suddenly stuck me that infertility in the Bible is always presented as an opportunity for God to do something wonderful. Every single time. All the women of Israel we see struggling to conceive, and crying out – Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah, Rachel, Elisabeth – went on to have children who heralded

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great changes in God’s master plan. Why? Because in showing that He could intervene in doing what seemed impossible for these women, and accomplishing great things through them, He foreshadowed that He would do the actual impossible, and accomplish the

greatest of all things. A virgin would conceive, and bring forth a Son, and He would be called Immanuel. God walking among us; God in human skin. The difficulty of birth from infertility pointed to the miracle of divine birth from virginity.

Not every woman who experiences childlessness will have

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this kind of miracle. Very often, God chooses to do a 'new thing' when we would prefer our own desire, our own solution. But as 'God among us' was a miracle, so 'God through us' is as well. What the Almighty

can accomplish through a woman who offers Him her broken heart has no bounds.

Anna had been a widow for decades and it was not until her eighties that God allowed her both to hold and to prophesy over His infant Son. Lydia had no family mentioned but she was a beloved mother to an emerging church. Esther saved all the Jews of an empire. Mary of Magdala was lonely and demon-possessed but became one of Jesus' first disciples. Ruth, as we showed earlier, was a woman of valour. So often, God gives us something, whether a task or a blessing, much bigger than anything we would have imagined for ourselves.

Okay, I'm going to go there. Deep breath.

'Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children

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of her who is married,' says the LORD. 'Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and your people the desolate cities.

*'Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of Hosts is his name ... For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off... for a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you.'*⁴

I have to say these are, straight-up, some of the most offensive verses in the entire Bible. You didn't get the thing you wanted most in all your life? It's all good! Sing a song! *Forget about it!* If this was the message from a person in your life, you'd call them heartless – after all, they don't have the power to bring joy out of despair. But because He does, let's look at the heart of God.

The book of Isaiah is all about hope when hope is gone. God is speaking here not just to barren women but to a nation that was now in captivity. The land itself was barren, the homes smouldering ruins. There was emptiness, yet He could see the time coming when the tents of Israel would be bursting with the peoples of the world, all because of the coming Messiah who would be the fruit of the union between

4. Isaiah 54:1-7.

God and His people. We have seen some of that prophecy fulfilled already, and I believe we will see new levels of it in ages to come. What God's Word says is trustworthy. It comes to pass, miracles and all.

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shouldn't take these things as the evidence of their rejection by the Lord. Instead, they should rejoice as if they've already received the fulfilment of their longing, and should prepare their place to receive abundance – because, as surely as God brought His people safe through captivity and planted them back in their land, He can fill you too.

Keep your eyes open. Not just for what you expect Him to do, but for whatever He might do! It may not be that you will have children in the way you expect, but whatever His plan is, for the woman who seeks and loves Him, it is to fill her up completely. It might be through doing His work. It might be through adoption. It might be through mentoring younger Christians. It might be through a career that becomes a calling. It might be through following a mother-in-law to her hometown, or elevation to the monarchy in turbulent

times, or showing generosity to those in need. But one thing is sure: if it is going to truly fill us to bursting, it HAS to mean a filling of Jesus and His Spirit. ‘I have come to give life, and give it abundantly,’ Jesus says. And another way to read that? He is the only way to find abundant life. Let me explain.

Reasons to be Grateful

I know some of you, who have not had biological children, were probably seething at my description of my ingratitude and impatience with my own babies. I know that feeling: a pregnant friend would complain to me about her nausea or something, and I would think *you are complaining to the wrong person*. Remember, these are the children I had begged God for, a desire of my heart that I felt would never come. And here is the hard truth of it.

Without having your greatest desires submitted to Christ and shaped by Christ, receiving them is utterly unfulfilling. Unless gratitude to Christ, recognising that even the hard parts are part of His blessing, is a habit of your heart, then all these gifts will lose their shine.

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Look at examples from your own life and you'll know it to be true. You were desperate to get that job, but now you hate Monday mornings. You waited months for

him to propose, but there are days you still feel alone. You were so excited to move to the new flat, but now you're homesick for your old town. You were so glad about that pay rise, but now you want to upgrade your car and the money's short again.

So it is for motherhood: you dreamed of running your fingers through their little curls, but now if you hear ‘*Muuuuu-uuuuu*’ one more time you’re going to charge into their bedroom with a tantrum of your own!

Without a conscious willingness toward gratitude, nothing of worldly value, even relationships, will ever satisfy you. Like a child asking for a new toy the week after the Christmas bonanza, you will always want something else out of your grasp. So how do you foster gratitude?

I’m going to tell you what worked for me. Thankfully, my selfishness and irritability wasn’t the end of the story for my relationship with my children. We haven’t got to the end yet, because God is still working on my heart. But there was, at least, a turn in direction. And it’s a surprise twist.

The turn my life took was repentance. Gut-wrenching, open-eyed repentance about deep-seated attitudes in my own heart. I’ll give you an example. When I called my pastor’s wife one day crying because I could see how harsh I was being to my own child, she said, ‘I never knew I was an angry person until I had children.’ What I heard in that exchange was, ‘Children just make everyone angry sometimes, even mellow people.’ What I finally understood, several years on after the Lord intervened, was this: I have an anger problem. It was a latent area that I didn’t realise was even in my heart, but there it was. I get unjustly angry. I have murder in my heart – murder of my own children. My babies, just by acting like babies do, finally showed up what was underneath the surface.

Now you'll be wondering where the gratitude comes in. Here it comes. *Thank you, Lord, for showing me this sinful attitude, because now I am asking you to help me defeat this sin.*

The gratitude is that Christ paid for all my selfishness, all my rage-filled hissing at being woken in the night, and somehow each day still chooses me to pour into their little hearts not only love, but also joy and godliness.

The gratitude is being able to see them as gifts, not as burdens, because when I asked God for the ability actually to enjoy my children instead of slogging on in my duty, He answered by changing my heart toward them.

The gratitude is knowing that the Lord is so much more tender toward my children – and toward me – than I ever am, even at my best, and that He will keep on transforming me to reflect His character, by and by.

Lisa quotes Randy Alcorn: 'With gratitude, there's happiness; without it, there's unhappiness. Every time.'⁵

I don't know what you have to repent of. I spent many years, even those exhausted and angry years, feeling like a super-good person and excellent Christian. Look how dutiful I was! How I always served myself last! How worn out my clothes and my eyes were! But beneath it, I was trying to hold myself together. May I never go back to that place.

Are you a complainer? Do you pretend everything's good when you're despairing over a secret vice? Do you look down on other Christians, much less the super sinful people outside your particular denomination? Do you make sure you're comfortable

5. Harper, p.140.

and pampered before you give any of your money to the church or to others? Do you pine over what you don't have? Are there things in your life you simply don't want to surrender?

In my experience, gratitude begins with repentance. That's how far I've come in the story. But to go on, and Lisa makes this point in her book, solidify your gratitude by feeding it.

Frankly, if we've put our hope in Jesus Christ, our thought life is under the authority of the Holy Spirit. That doesn't mean every single thing that sails through that space between our ears will be sacred, but we don't have to be controlled by pessimism, cynicism, or fear. As Martin Luther brilliantly observed, 'You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from making a nest in your hair.'⁶

Basically, the thoughts and feelings we dwell on go a long way toward determining our moods and attitudes. When I spend all my time thinking about how exhausted, martyred, homesick and *cough cough* noble I am as a mother, I feel ever more despairing, lonely, even hopeless. When I make a conscious decision to delight in Jesus, praise Him, ask Him for help, and walk in His presence, the burden lifts, and I feel very, very happy and satisfied in Him. I don't really know how else to put it: as an old Sunday School song says, *happiness is the Lord*.

So how do you give Him fulfilling and happy worship? Well, give thanks for all the good things in your life, sure. But give thanks when things are hard too. As nobody's favourite

6 Ibid, p.111.

verse says, ‘Give thanks in all circumstances.’⁷ Give thanks for the character God is forming in you. Give thanks that you’re not alone. Give thanks that God is good, even when life is hard.

There is happiness in the Christian life. You don’t have to feel it all the time. But know that, no matter what has happened to you, a life centred in Jesus will find joy – and *enjoyment* – again. Not joy with a sense of dread in the background. Not just joy amidst the tears. *Joy* joy. Abundant, overflowing joy! We open ourselves up to it with repentance. We feed it with giving thanks in all circumstances. How do we hold on to it in the midst of temptation or distraction or discouragement? We have Jesus’ mind in ourselves.

Come with me.

Play to an Audience of One

There’s a wonderful verse for keeping us motivated in living a humble and service-centred Christian life: ‘Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (held onto), but emptied himself, by taking on the form of a servant ... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.’⁸ I would suggest these verses also give us a hint toward living a happier Christian life.

How did Jesus stay humble, living as God in human form? How did He never once work for His own exultation, enjoy the flattery of people wanting to crown Him by force? How did He not get distracted by the power and earthly glory

7. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

8. Philippians 2:5-11.

of it? Right now, my last book is number 4 on Amazon's best-selling Religious Biographies categories and I feel like phoning up every publisher who ever rejected me just to do a mic drop. It's a fight to give God the glory even though I know that the start I made to that book in my own power, before God laid me low and then stepped in to work through me, was absolutely pitiful. I can categorically tell you that if the whole country was lauding me as the greatest teacher who ever lived, the Anointed One of God, I would absolutely take the compliment and consider my work done and accept all those tithes. Not go on to wash my students' feet and submit to a horrible death. So how did Jesus stay humble and happy, not grasping for power or recognition?

One, He was fixed on the needs of others and the will of His Father. Two, His divine nature was repelled by the ugliness of pride. But most of all, He was completely secure in who He was. He didn't need people to tell Him how fantastic that sermon was. He didn't need a promotion or award or bestseller list to feel validated. He didn't need to hear He was special. Being totally fulfilled by oneness with the Father – and listen, not the STATUS but the COMMUNITY of that oneness – He had no need of human approval. Instead He found rest in His Father's love ('This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased')⁹ and in withdrawing FROM those fickle crowds to enjoy His presence.

Why, then, are we told so often to praise and worship God in the Bible? Does He need built up, His triune ego stroked? Certainly not. He simply knows that in gratitude to Him we

9. Matthew 3:17.

find our greatest happiness and fulfilment. Praise is nothing but rejoicing in God's goodness, and fellowshiping with Him. So, in Jesus, we know we can enjoy the belovedness of being His children, and we know that His comfort (and His pleasure in us) is sufficient for all our emotional needs. If we are looking for human approbation for our Christian work, then are we really doing it for Him?

Whatever you're doing, don't do it for people. People will forget to say thank you. They'll criticise your most heartfelt attempt to bless them. They'll fail to notice what you've done. They'll give someone else the credit. Your Father sees everything, and He longs to welcome you home with the words 'Good and Faithful Servant'. Bear in mind that Jesus' ministry was marked with only superficial human approval. Underneath all the hosannas, 'He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.' But that did not dim His joy in the Father. He was playing to an audience of One.

Ever since I was little, I have struggled with a guilt and responsibility complex. It's called scrupulosity; you can look it up. I've had periods where it has tipped over into obsessive compulsive behaviour and it took

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me twenty minutes to leave the house for work every day because I had to start counting over and over again how many times I had checked the faucets or turned the key in the lock.

You know how sometimes a fact that you understand from the Bible suddenly jumps into technicolour, and it feels like

it's real to you for the first time? Well, this Thanksgiving I was driving along to the shops, doing the normal rushed holiday errands, when I was struck by the thought *God doesn't see my sin*. I pulled into the shopping centre car park and bawled my eyes out because it occurred to me that God sees me as perfect and holy – so differently from how I see myself!

That doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit doesn't do His work of conviction and transformation. It doesn't mean that Jesus no longer has to intercede for me at His Father's right hand. But it does mean that when the Father looks at me, He looks through rose-coloured glasses: the colour of Jesus' redeeming blood. My sins, which were scarlet, are now like snow. My selfishness and irritability and ingratitude are cast away from me as far as east is from west. If you hate yourself, if you can't stop the guilt, if you will never be 'good enough' to profess faith publicly, if you are hopeless, if you can't find a motivation to praise or to serve, if you are ungrateful and unhappy, let that sink in.

God finds His pleasure, His happiness, in you. Where do you find yours?

How does Jesus Show Joy?

Lisa tells a story of taking Missy to get her quarterly HIV jabs: a process her daughter naturally hates and which always leads to panicked screaming. Instead of having Missy focus on the needle, Lisa gets her to look right in her eyes and focus on her mother's love. There's an obvious parallel with how we should live in times of confusion or discouragement: 'Wouldn't you know it, our happiness boils down to pretty much what I told

Missy a few weeks ago at the hospital: ‘Focus on me, baby. Focus on me.’¹⁰

We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus! So how does He show joy and happiness?

We don’t see Jesus cracking a lot of jokes, unless you watch *The Chosen* – which I absolutely recommend, but unfortunately can’t cite as Scripture. Where we do see Him, though, is at a wedding. You know the one. Either the bride and groom were poor or the guests were having a really good time, because they ran out of wine that day in Cana. Now, what was Jesus doing at that wedding? Was He prudishly shielding His eyes from the dancing? Did He mutter, ‘About time they ran out – look at the state of Uncle Joachim?’ We might have seen some Christians with that begrudging attitude, but not Jesus! He not only replenished the wine, He made it the best wine.

Here’s a few things about wine in the Bible. One, it symbolises joy and abundance. It is often referred to in times of renewal and celebration, and not in a disparaging way either (while alcohol abuse is forbidden several

Now, what was Jesus doing at that wedding? Was He prudishly shielding His eyes from the dancing? Did He mutter, ‘About time they ran out – look at the state of Uncle Joachim?’

times throughout both Testaments, using alcohol in a community setting carries no stigma). Jesus also talks about the ridiculousness of putting ‘new wine’ into old wineskins –

10. Harper, p. 61.

they'll burst and the wine and the skins are both ruined. You can't just shove the Holy Spirit into old religious practices or worldly attitudes. Our whole person needs to be made new too, ready to share out the good news. Finally, as well as symbolising joy and the Holy Spirit, there's a holiness to wine. It is a picture of Jesus' blood: something precious, set apart and beautiful, and provided as part of a holy Feast. And, even in the function of holiness, it doesn't lose the joy. That's still there in the background – because what is more joyful than knowing our sins are forgiven, that the Lord Jesus dwells in us? 'He who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.'¹¹

Come to think of it, Jesus didn't provide just wine in His ministry. He went around spreading happiness. The happiness of physical healing. The happiness of freedom from an evil spirit. The happiness of tearing down religious walls that He never built in the first place. The happiness of a hated tax collector who suddenly found himself hosting the city's celebrity rabbi. The happiness of two sisters receiving their brother back from the dead. The happiness of Samaritans learning that, though they had rejected their Old Testament relationship with God, the Messiah had come to them anyway. People who opened themselves up to Jesus *found happy*.

And people who make others happy, people who give others hope, people who bring the biggest keg of the 'good stuff' to the party – those are happy people. And that's how we know that Jesus was absolutely brimming with joy.

11. Isaiah 55:1.

Verses on Happiness and Gratitude

Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength' (Neh. 8:10).

This verse comes at a time when the people of Judah, having returned to Jerusalem after decades of captivity, hear the Law read out for the first time. They are filled with sorrow because of how they have broken God's Law – but it's the date of the Feast of Tabernacles, and instead of spending time stuck in guilt and repetitive repentance, God asks them instead to obey Him by rejoicing! Is it time for you to leave your old mistakes behind and praise Him as He has commanded? Can you be held up by the strength of His joy?

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fulness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11).

Sometimes it takes us a while of walking down life's path before we realise where it leads: that the best joy, the happiness like fine wine, the greatest pleasure that truly expands the human heart, is found in His presence. Do you trust that? Do you believe it? Then seek His presence, and walk your path even if it leads through the valley of the shadow of death. And make sure to notice happiness when it comes to you. Often the Lord speaks, assures or provides through the smallest of details. Look for them.

The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing (Zeph. 3:17).

What can I possibly add to this verse? Sit before the Lord to feel your spirit quieting under His love. Listen for the sound of His singing.

Questions

1. What are the specific attributes, stories or sayings of Jesus that make you feel delight in Him and ready to praise?
2. When do you struggle most with ingratitude? Are there sinful attitudes or behaviours that hamper your ability to have joy? How would it add to your happiness or freedom to know those sins are as far from you as east is from west?
3. What are you most grateful for in your life? What do you need to cultivate greater happiness?

*Happiness is to know the Saviour
Living a life within His favour
Having a change in my behaviour
Happiness is the Lord.*

*True joy is mine
No matter if the teardrops start
I've found the answer
It's Jesus in my heart!*

*Happiness is to be forgiven
Living a life that's worth the living
Traveling the road that leads to heaven
Happiness is the Lord!*

– Ira F. Stanphill, Singspiration