

I WANT TO ENJOY LIFE

Psalm 37:4

Mary Poppins is a movie classic about life in nineteenth century London. One of the characters is an uptight prim-and-proper banker who really doesn't enjoy life. One day he brings his son to the bank and, because of his son's misconduct, the dad is summoned before the owners of the bank. It is an awful, wonderful day when he decides that he is going to change his style and begin enjoying life.

That's what we all want to do—enjoy life! Some of us seek enjoyment from a prison of perfectionism. We are so busy doing everything just right that we have lost our joy along the way. Some of us seek enjoyment from day-to-day chaos. Our lives are so completely out of control that we wonder if we will ever be happy again. But all of us share the desire for a good life—a life with some magical mix of contentment, purpose, peace, happiness and joy. Joy most of all! We simply want to enjoy life.

You may be surprised to learn that **the reason we want enjoyment is that God designed us for enjoyment.** When God was plotting the motherboard of humanity he wired in a desire for joy. That would have been a cruel design if God had not also provided the resources for us to enjoy life.

Listen to the summary of creation that is written in the first chapter of the Bible:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

God designed a world for enjoyment, with personal relationships, marriage, sex, family, fish, birds, plants, food and more. Then God stepped back and checked out everything he had made and saw that it was very good. God enjoyed us humans and the world he put us in, and he enjoyed the prospect of our enjoying what he had made.

When a musician performs, when a poet writes, when an artist draws a masterpiece, when you give a back rub—the purpose is to give enjoyment to others. When the recipient of our creativity says “thank you” we respond by saying “I’m glad you enjoyed it!” That’s the way it is with God—he is glad when we enjoy life as he designed us to enjoy life. We say “thank you” and God says, “I’m glad you enjoyed it!”

It is especially important for us to realize that God designed us for enjoyment because there are experiences in life that are deeply troublesome and the troubles of life can steal the enjoyment of life. Jesus is the one who said in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Jesus left heaven and came to earth. His purpose was to follow up on what God had done in creation so that the purposes of God might be fulfilled, and that includes our enjoyment of life to the full.

But this same Jesus also said in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Troubles are an inevitable part of our world and our lives. Strange as it seems, we will never really enjoy life until we understand the inevitability of troubles. Everyone has them. They have been around since the Garden of Eden. They are going to continue for the rest of our lives. There is no escaping trouble.

We often try to eliminate trouble from life. We exercise and eat right to stay healthy and avoid the trouble of sickness. We save money and buy insurance to protect against the trouble of poverty. We choose our friends, raise our children, get an education and plan our lives to be as trouble-free as humanly possible. We treat others in ways to minimize life’s problems—either by being very nice with the hope that everyone will be nice back or by being very mean with the hope of protecting ourselves from others’ evils. We convince ourselves that if we work hard enough and long enough we can get past the troubles of life and then we’ll be home free.

Living a good life is commendable. Just don’t think it will eliminate trouble. Athletes die. Vegetarians get sick. Billionaires can end up bankrupt. Children raised in the best possible way can turn out wrong. Sometimes we are betrayed by those we treat the best. **We will never**

escape troubles in life. They are part of the sinful world in which we live and they are woven into the fabric of every human biography.

Wow! This sounds terribly bleak. It's hardly what you would expect to hear when we're dealing with enjoying life. That's exactly the point. Unless we understand how to deal with the troubles we are never going to enjoy life as we are supposed to.

So how do we fit all of this together? There are three powerful concepts. They are contentment, delight and joy.

Contentment aligns expectations and circumstances. Let's take a look at how this works. Advertisers tell us that a typical American is exposed to 3,000 different ads per day. If you sleep seven hours a night and don't dream ads that's about 180 ads per hour or three ads per minute. These ads are designed to trigger discontent. They invite us to want cars, houses, vacations, jobs, computers or relationships that we don't now have. It is impossible to acquire all that looks appealing to us. Not only do we not have enough money, we don't have enough time.

We have a choice: control our expectations or control our circumstances. Some of us try very hard to control life's circumstances. We seek to do it all—perfect grades, perfect bodies, perfect weddings, perfect houses, perfect jobs, perfect lives. But, no one can pull it off. Some seem to do better than others but often they are the ones with the highest expectations and therefore have the biggest disappointments. Not one of us is capable of controlling all of our circumstances.

Try personalizing the concept. Think of something that reduced or eliminated your enjoyment of life this past week. What did you do? Many of us tried very hard to change the circumstances so that we would be happy. We worked hard to get more money, to change jobs, to fix relationships, to get rid of pain and to solve our problems.

Discontent is especially epidemic in our generation because our expectations are so high. Advertising gives us the impression that we can all be perpetually young, strong and good looking. Modern medicine has so many successes that we all expect to live very long healthy lives. We have idealized marriage to the point that we think there shouldn't be any troubles in marriage, and when there are we are tempted to abandon that relationship.

All of this is ironic. We live at a time of greater prosperity, longer life expectancy and more resources than any generation in human history. At the same time we may enjoy life less than most other generations because our expectations keep rising faster than reality can keep up.

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Contentment is the alignment of expectations and circumstances. If we cannot change our circumstances to match our expectations then the other choice is to change our expectations to match our circumstances. In old-fashioned terms: “Be content with what you have.”

Imagine how much more enjoyment there would be in life if we chose to be content with the job we have, the person to whom we are married, the money we earn, the bodies God gave us and most of the rest of life’s circumstances. I propose a 100% increase in the enjoyment of life if we actively adjust expectations to circumstances rather than always try to adjust circumstances to expectations. It was St. Paul who wrote in Philippians 4:11-12:

... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

What an interesting choice of words: “... I have *learned* to be content whatever the circumstances.” Apparently St. Paul was once discontent. His expectations were out of control. He understood the concept of contentment and then deliberately learned and chose to adjust his expectations to his circumstances.

This is a powerful truth, and it will work pretty much for anybody. You don’t have to read the Bible or believe in God or be a follower of Jesus Christ. If you change expectations to match circumstances you will experience contentment and life will be a whole lot more enjoyable. But there is something more that works only for Christians. Consider the words of Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Here’s how I used to understand these words: If you like God he’ll give you whatever you want in life. That seemed like a good deal to me. It’s also a rather selfish approach to a relationship—love God and you can use him to get wealth, health and everything else.

I remember the day I understood these words in a totally different way. I was a seminary student working part-time as a church youth pastor. College students came home for the summer and I was teaching their class. One student briefly spoke about the meaning of the words and said that if we make God the delight of our lives he will control the desires of our hearts and change our hearts to desire the right things.

Why didn't I think of that? I was the pastor (sort of). She was a college sophomore. I remember the room we were in, her name and where she sat. While I doubt she would recall anything about this, she had a major impact on my life and thinking.

What if our hearts' desires were to change to what God wants us to desire and then God gave us the fulfillment of those desires? Then God becomes the goal of life and we get everything we want and need. Then we can truly enjoy life in a way that would otherwise be impossible.

This is not only the *best* way to truly enjoy life; it is the *only* way to truly enjoy life. Make God your heart's desire. Love him. Pursue him. Please him. **When you and I delight in God he will cause us to desire what is good and right.**

Jesus said the same thing in a different way in Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The context of Jesus' words includes food, drink, clothes and getting over the worries of life.

We frequently talk about having the right priorities in life. Students of language say that the word has changed. Centuries ago the word only appeared in the singular. There was no such word as "priorities"; the only word was "priority". Only one priority can top the list of life. Jesus says that those who want to really enjoy life should have the priority of God.

What would that look like? We think about God. We love God. We consider God in every detail of our lives—the car we drive, the attitudes we have, the words we speak, the relationships we have. God is more important to us than time, money, health, friendships, business deals, vacations or luxuries.

But it's more than just thinking about God; it's delighting in God—thrilled with who he is, loving what he says, amazed by his goodness, believing him in everything, looking for his hand in everything that happens. And when we delight in God, he changes the desires of our hearts and we enjoy life.

I've known people who have hated their jobs until God changed their desires to love their jobs. Some have never wanted to see a husband or wife again and God changed the desires of their hearts to fall in love all over again. People disliked the place where they lived until God changed their heart to prefer that place more than any other. These are those who came to truly enjoy life!

The greatest opportunity to live out these teachings of the Bible is not in the easy parts of life but in the hardest parts of life. What we need is a joy that is for all seasons, designed to celebrate the best, but also strong enough to survive the worst.

What if we could have a joy that lasted even through the greatest difficulties of life? Not that we would ever say that we “enjoy” being sick, experiencing disaster or facing death. But it is possible to have joy even in these difficulties. Jesus’ brother, James, wrote in James 1:2-3, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” These are the words of someone who so totally delights in God, adjusts expectations to experience contentment and truly believes that God is good even when life is bad that she even has joy that floats her through the bad days.

Ground fault interrupters are those often-misunderstood little switches in the middle of bathroom and outside outlets. They are designed to shut off the electricity rather than allow you to have a shock that might kill you.

Recently I couldn’t get an appliance to work and I was in a hurry. I was inconvenienced until I figured out that the GFI needed to be reset. While bothered by the inconvenience I was glad that the GFI worked. I was happy about what I was sad about.

That’s what the joy of Jesus does in a Christian. We experience the goodness of God in the troubles of life. We are happy God’s grace works. We are sad about the problems we face. We rejoice in what went wrong. It is like a test. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

We received a long-distance phone call to our home this past week from the dad of an adult son who shared with us some difficult news about his son. This son has made some poor choices in life and has faced his share of problems and difficulties. For the better part of four decades these parents have prayed for their son to come into a right relationship with God and for his life to be what God wants it to be.

He has not felt well over recent months. He tried many different medical remedies, but just a few days ago he had an MRI that showed a large mass on one of his lungs. He has been given a list of possible causes, but even the best on the list isn’t very good. So this is a very heavy time. It’s about as bad as things can get.

But this dad went on with joy in his voice to talk about what has been happening in his son's life. His relationship to God has been transformed. He has come close to Jesus Christ in a way that he never was before. He has a peace and a contentment that has his father flabbergasted as he witnesses what his boy is going through. It's both at the same time. In the same sentences, with fluctuating tone of voice, this dad talks about this great difficulty and this supernatural joy.

I am fascinated by the stories I hear from persons who have experienced great trauma. Cancer survivors, those who have been assaulted and those who have suffered near-death experiences. Sometimes they are individuals who have been given a prognosis that tells them exactly how many more days they have to live.

They say that the world looks different now. They are not in so much of a hurry. Things that once seemed all-important now seem unimportant. The colors of flowers are more vivid. The coldest days of winter don't seem so bad. Their families are more precious. And their relationship to God is the highest priority of everyday life.

These people are totally enjoying life. They are living out all the principles we have considered. They fully understand the enjoyment God designed them to live. They have experienced the troubles of life firsthand. They are content and they delight in God. In spite of their circumstances they are the dream come true.

Every time I hear this I think, "Can't this be done without an accident, without cancer or without trauma?" Can't we truly enjoy life as God intended without having the tires shot out from under us?

The answer is yes! That's precisely what God wants. He wants us to choose to enjoy life, to choose to align expectations with circumstances and to be content. Choose to delight in God and let him give you the desires of your heart. Choose to live the joy of Jesus Christ in the midst of difficulty.

St. Paul said it well in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

Enjoy life. Live it to the full. That's what Jesus said.