

Can I Have Joy in My Life?

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R. C. SPROUL

Can I Have Joy in My Life?

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Chapter One

Don't Worry, Be Joyful

The word *joy* appears over and over again in the Scriptures. For instance, the Psalms are filled with references to joy. The psalmists write, “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5b) and “Shout for joy to God, all the earth” (Ps. 66:1). Likewise, in the New Testament, we read that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22), which means that it is a Christian virtue. Given this biblical emphasis, we need to understand what joy is and pursue it.

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Sometimes we struggle to grasp the biblical view of joy because of the way it is defined and described in Western culture today. In particular, we often confuse joy with happiness. In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–11), according to the traditional translations, Jesus said: “*Blessed* are the poor in spirit. . . . *Blessed* are those who mourn. . . . *Blessed* are the meek . . .” (vv. 3–5, emphasis added), and so on. Sometimes, however, translators adopt the modern vernacular and tell us Jesus said *happy* rather than *blessed*. I always cringe a little when I see that, not because I am opposed to happiness, but because the word *happy* in our culture has been sentimentalized and trivialized. As a result, it connotes a certain superficiality. For example, years ago, Charles M. Schulz, in the comic strip *Peanuts*, coined the adage, “Happiness is a warm puppy,” and it became a maxim that articulated a sentimental, warm-and-fuzzy idea of happiness. Then there was the catchy song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” released by Bobby McFerrin in the 1980s. It suggested a carefree, cavalier attitude of delight.

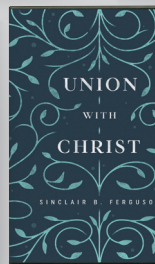
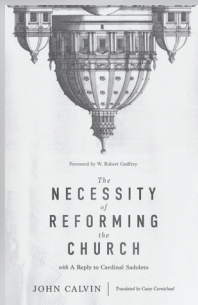
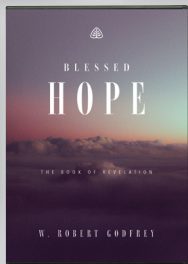
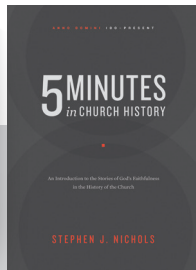
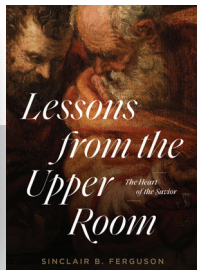
However, the Greek word used in the Beatitudes is best translated as *blessed*, as it communicates not only the idea of happiness but also profound peace, comfort, stability,

and great joy. So, we have to be careful when we come to the text of the New Testament that we do not read it through the lens of the popular understanding of happiness and thus lose the biblical concept of joy.

Think again about McFerrin's song. The lyrics are very odd from a contemporary perspective. When he sings, "Don't worry, be happy," he is issuing an imperative, a command: "Do not be anxious. Rather, be happy." He is setting forth a duty, not making a suggestion. However, we never think of happiness in this way. When we are unhappy, we think it is impossible to decide by an act of the will to change our feelings. We tend to think of happiness as something passive, something that happens to us and over which we have no control. It is involuntary. Yes, we desire it and want to experience it, but we are convinced that we cannot create it by an act of the will.

Oddly, McFerrin sounds very much like the New Testament when he commands his listeners to be happy. Over and over again in the pages of the New Testament, the idea of joy is communicated as an imperative, as an obligation. Based on the biblical teaching, I would go so far as to say that it is the Christian's duty, his moral obligation, to be

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