



Suffering and Happiness

Are They Mutually Exclusive?

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Imagine you are in the hospital, seriously ill, and the prognosis is not promising. Your doctor comes in on his daily rounds and asks how you are. You tell him you are frightened, anxious and worried. You let him know that the prospect of death terrifies you because you cannot imagine life separated from those you love. It is, you say, as if your whole world is falling apart. Your doctor listens carefully and, you think, compassionately. You wait for him to console and reassure you. But then he says, “I understand, but are you happy?”

His question seems shockingly thoughtless and incredibly insensitive, so much so that you wonder if he was really listening at all. Instead of calming you, he has only made you more distraught. Instead of lifting your spirits, he has sunk them.

The doctor may not seem to fit our description of a sensitive and caring physician, but perhaps we should not dismiss his question so quickly. We may be shocked and even angered by his words, because we easily assume that suffering is inherently incompatible with joy. A little suffering means a little less happiness. More suffering means even less happiness. Great suffering means no happiness at all.

But if suffering is the antithesis of happiness and joy — if they are truly mutually exclusive — then our hold on happiness is weaker, and much more precarious, than we customarily think. No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape suffering. Suffering is part of the fabric of life; an unchosen and unwelcome part, for sure, but something every human being eventually confronts. Thus, if

the only way to sustain happiness is by avoiding pain, sorrow and loss, we are faced with a depressing and seemingly insurmountable dilemma. How can we possibly live in joyful hope when we know that some day we will meet a cross that bears our name?¹

A CHRISTIAN ACCOUNT OF HAPPINESS

Could the doctor’s question be pertinent, even insightful? Could he be right to suggest that happiness can coexist with suffering? It all depends on what we think happiness is.

If we identify happiness with pleasure, then obviously illness diminishes happiness because illness results in pain, whether it is physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual pain.

If we equate happiness with always being in control and getting our way, then surely suffering jeopardizes happiness because nothing strips us of control and reminds us of our vulnerability more than suffering, perhaps especially the suffering associated with serious illness and loss. Suffering discloses the fragility of our lives, the

undeniable limits of our powers and particularly our inevitable decline and inescapable mortality.

As moral theologian Fr. Sebastian MacDonald notes, “Suffering is undesirable, and one seeks to avoid it, if possible, or else eliminate or diminish it. It is negativity, involving absence, loss, limitation, restriction.”²

That is true, but the question persists: Must suffering, even terrible suffering, obliterate happiness? When faced with hardship, adversity, struggles, hurts and deep disappointments, must we also be robbed of joy? When the wounds of life accumulate, must they also finally defeat us by stripping us of the confidence and peace that are sure signs of hope?

Here, a Christian account of happiness can help us, because Christianity maintains that genuine happiness is not a weak and fleeting emotion that shrivels at the first hint of hardship, but, rather, something much more resilient, unshakable and deeply rooted in us. As the theologian Philip Kenneson writes, “One of the hallmarks of Christian joy is that it can be experienced in the midst of immense sorrow and loss.”³ And that is because happiness, from a Christian perspective, is not “the absence of something undesirable, such as pain, suffering, or disappointment,” but rather “the presence of something desirable: God.”⁴

The early Christian theologian St. Augustine can help us understand why this is true. Augustine did not become a Christian until 387, when he was 33 years old. A year later, he wrote *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*. In that treatise, Augustine makes an unremarkable claim: “Certainly, we all wish to live happily.” But he went on to say that we will not be happy if we lack what we love, if we possess what we love but it is harmful, or if we have not learned to love what is best.⁵

Augustine knew from the meandering odyssey of his life’s first 33 years that somehow happiness is connected to loving, because we naturally love what we think will fulfill us and bring us joy. But from the mistakes and mishaps of those years, he also learned that loving, alone, will not make us happy. Rather, we are happy only when we love, seek and ultimately possess what is best for us. For Augustine, that is God. Happiness is becoming one with and being transformed by the unsur-

passable love and goodness that is found only in God. Happiness is holiness.

This discovery inspired what are perhaps the most heartfelt and memorable words Augustine ever wrote. At the beginning of the *Confessions*, the story of Augustine’s conversion, which is a book that is meant to be read as an unfolding prayer to God, he says: “You ... have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”⁶

Augustine claimed that happiness is inseparable from goodness, specifically the absolutely captivating and incomparably beautiful goodness that is found in God. Loving God wholeheartedly and faithfully is happiness, because God is the supreme and most excellent good in whose image we are made and in whose love we are completed. Even more, loving God wholeheartedly and faithfully is happiness, because we become what we love and gradually are made one with

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— PHILIP KENNESON

what we love. This is why suffering does not have to imperil happiness. If God is our good, and we become one with God through love, then the spiritual communion we have with God that is happiness abides at the very center of our lives and is deeper and stronger than any sorrow that may visit us or any affliction that may come upon us.

If happiness depends on health, financial security, power, physical or mental ability or just having things go our way more often than not, then any appearance of suffering jeopardizes happiness. But if the essence of happiness is growing in the love and goodness of God in order to share intimately in the life of God, then no suffering and no sorrow are powerful enough to rob us of joy.⁷ Indeed, if loving and being loved by God is the soul of happiness, then suffering need not be the enemy of happiness, and all of us, even in the darkest moments of our lives, can suffer in hope. This is precisely why in Romans 8:35, the apostle Paul could exultantly proclaim: “What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress,



or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?”

No matter how intense and how prolonged, suffering cannot snatch joy from us because nothing, Paul insists, “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)

A CAUTIONARY NOTE

Still, to hold that one can suffer and still be happy is emphatically not to claim that suffering is essential to, or necessary for, happiness. We may be able to find good in our suffering, but suffering itself is not good. No one wants to suffer, because suffering comes between us and the lives we want to have. Too, suffering threatens our sense of ourselves and our trust in the meaning and purpose of life. Anyone struggling with a serious illness, the unexpected loss of a job, the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship knows this is true. We may endure suffering, but we do not seek it, because by its very nature suffering “restricts, victimizes, oppresses, and deprives.”⁸

Like an unwelcome guest, suffering forces us to readjust our lives in ways that we never would have chosen and often resent. We have goals we want to accomplish and hopes for the future, but suffering distances us from those goals and weakens those hopes. Indeed, suffering can make us question and rethink everything.⁹

This is why to claim that suffering and joy need not be diametrically opposed is, at the same time, neither to minimize nor to deny the substantial

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pain, sorrow and hardship that suffering can bring into our lives. Suffering is not our joy, God is. And, again, this means not that suffering is good, but that suffering need not separate us from God, who is our greatest good and the source and summit of our happiness. This was the wisdom of the saints.

As author Robert Ellsberg notes, the saints “did not believe that suffering is ‘good’ but that God is good and that ‘neither death nor life ... nor height, nor depth’ can deprive us of access to that

good if we truly desire it. They found that there is no place that is literally ‘godforsaken,’ but that in every situation, even the most grim and painful, there is a door that leads to love, to fullness of life ... to happiness.”¹⁰

In short, the saints teach us that joy is not a matter of escaping suffering, but of being in God.

A NARRATIVE OF HOPE

Christians also believe that suffering does not cast out joy because of the narrative that guides, shapes and inspires their lives. That narrative begins with Easter, the great feast that celebrates the bedrock truth of our lives: Death may be real, but love is stronger.

Take away Easter, and death wins. Leave Jesus in the tomb and death, evil and darkness triumph. The heart of the Easter message is that death may be real — and so are suffering, loss and evil — but none of them ultimately prevails, because in the resurrection of Jesus, God overcame everything that assails our hopes, everything that tempts us to live in fear, anxiety and even despair.

Easter testifies that in God we do not encounter a love that tries its best but ultimately fails; rather, Easter boldly proclaims that in God we find a love powerful, faithful, resilient and creative enough to bring things to life not just once, but again and again.

The resurrection of Jesus affirms a portrait of God first sketched in the creation accounts of Genesis. If God called things into being at the dawn of creation and delighted in that creation,

Easter witnesses that God calls us into being again and again, because not even death will undo what God’s creative love began.

A message of Easter is that every human being, as well as all of creation, is rejoiced in by God. Any person who finds his or her identity in this truth

can live in joy and hope, even amid great suffering.¹¹ Easter is God’s way of saying, “You are safe now and always will be, because you are and will always be with me.” This means we have eternal life now; we live already in its possession.

In the Gospel of John 10:14, when Jesus speaks of himself as the “good shepherd,” this is exactly what he means. He suggests that eternal life is not our end point, it is our starting point. It is not the life we hope for, but the reality in and from which

we always live. No suffering can conquer our joy because at every moment of our lives, we belong to God.

Jesus assures us: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (John 10:28-30)

Suffering cannot defeat us, can never destroy us, because at every moment of our lives, including the most sorrowful, we are held tight by a love that will never let us go.

Just as Jesus' resurrection illumines why suffering does not conquer joy, so, perhaps surprisingly, does Jesus' cross. The message of the cross is that when we suffer, we never suffer alone, because God, in Jesus, enters into every dimension of human experience and makes it God's own. The cross reveals that if God is love, we can be sure it is never God's will that we suffer. But the cross also reveals that if God is love, we can be sure that God is always with us in our suffering, strengthening us, comforting us, supporting us and grieving with us, because if somebody loves you, they never want you to suffer alone. Knowing that God does not flee the sorrow and pain of our lives but bears them with us is another reason we can experience joy and peace even in our suffering.

A QUESTION RECONSIDERED

The next day the same doctor again comes to your room. In some respects, nothing has changed. You are still seriously ill, and the prognosis remains unpromising. Like the day before, he asks: "Are you happy?" This time, however, the question seems neither thoughtless nor impertinent, but wise, compassionate and surprisingly reassuring. You receive the question as the gift he intends it

to be. And so, when the doctor leaves, you don't feel troubled or distressed, but rest in a peace and quiet joy you know will not be taken away. The suffering and pain will not defeat you, because you live in the love that can never be lost, a love that will outlast even death.

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NOTES

1. Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 3rd edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 57-59.
2. Sebastian K. MacDonald, *Moral Theology and Suffering* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 5.
3. Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 62.
4. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, 62.
5. Augustine, *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church*, trans. Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), III, iv.
6. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), I, i.
7. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 58.
8. Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993), 30.
9. Portions of this section are from Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 106.
10. Robert Ellsberg, *The Saints' Guide to Happiness* (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 104.
11. Portions of this paragraph and the preceding one are from Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, 44-45.

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