

A  
DIFFERENT  
KIND *of*  
HAPPINESS

*Discovering the JOY That Comes  
from Sacrificial LOVE*

DR. LARRY CRABB



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dr. Larry Crabb, *A Different Kind of Happiness*  
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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Crabb, Larry, 1944—author.

Title: A different kind of happiness : discovering the joy that comes from sacrificial love / Dr.

Larry Crabb.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015047248 | ISBN 9780801015311 (cloth) | ISBN 9780801015342

Subjects: LCSH: Joy—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Happiness—Religious aspects—

Christianity. | Love—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Sacrifice—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4647.J68 C.58 2016 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015047248>

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Emphasis in Scripture quotations has been added by the author.

Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with the author.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To the nearly two thousand friends who have participated in the School of Spiritual Direction and to Trip, Kent, Karla, Paul, Maribeth, Tom, and Anthony, who have served as spiritual directors; your lives have touched mine. I'm grateful.

To my sisters and brothers at First Presbyterian Church of Golden, Colorado, a spiritually forming community that reveals God's love to Rachael and to me; and to Dr. Miriam (Mimi) Dixon, who shepherds our community, and me, with the love and wisdom she receives from Jesus.

To Tom and Jenny, Bob and Claudia: our more than a decade long journey together on the narrow road has provided Rachael and me with uncommon encouragement. Close long-term friends are a rare gift.

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# Acknowledgments

**M**y name is on the cover of this publication, but no book is the product of one person. I couldn't possibly list the name of every person, living or dead, who has shaped my thinking and strengthened me in the long process of writing. A short list will have to do.

Sincere thanks to:

- Chad Allen, Lindsey Spoolstra, and the supportive team at Baker Books. Chad and Lindsey, your thoughtful editing has vastly improved this manuscript.
- Five close pastor friends: Trip Moore (a freelance pastor in Belgium), Kent Denlinger, Jim Kallam, Bill Lenz, and Jamie Rasmussen. Your perseverance in your call has energized me to persevere in mine.
- Dr. James Houston, Dr. J. I. Packer, and Jerry Miller: through brief conversations over many years each of you has meaningfully mentored me far more than you realize.
- Butch and Arlita: it's strangely wonderful how providence has woven our lives together. Keep following your dreams. They're from the Lord. I'm looking forward to a cup of coffee and a conversation that matters at the Red Dot Coffee House.

*Acknowledgments*

- Kep, Kimmie, Ken, Lesley, Josie, Jake, Kaitlyn, Keira, and Kenzie: two sons, two daughters-in-law, five grandchildren—family reaches places in my heart nothing else can. Your patience with a too-often-preoccupied father and grandfather is a gift of grace to me.
- Rich and Karlene: rarely have I been blessed with such faithfully guiding and supportive friends. Your vision for what God longs to do keeps my eyes focused up.
- Some clichés actually mean something. This one does. Last but not least, to our “little team” that keeps NewWay Ministries moving:

Andi: we wouldn't be as alive and blessed without you. You're terrific!

Kep: I couldn't be more proud as your father or more grateful as your employer. You're extraordinary!

Rachael: when we said our vows, had I known what would unfold over fifty years of marriage, I'd have fallen to my knees in worship. You're more than everything a husband could want! I love you.

# Prologue

If it's true, as the once popular song declared, that "Love makes the world go 'round," then we have reason to ask a disturbing question: *Is the worst problem in the world a shortfall of love?* Just about everywhere, from terrorist threats to political corruption, from school shootings to troubled marriages, the world gives evidence that love is in limited supply.

In the song, I assume *world* refers to human culture, to the world of people that functions well only to the degree that people function well, relationally. Other spheres of life and culture, such as movie-making, art displays, medical research, technology development, and perhaps even church activities, seem able to move along quite nicely without anyone having to relate at a deeply personal level. Human competence and commitment, as well as effective communication and sensitive congeniality, are required for success in those kinds of endeavors. Human connecting, the soul-to-soul relating that only Jesus makes possible, is not.

But if the world of distinctively human culture, *relational* culture, spins 'round only on the energy of love, then perhaps it's time to dust off and replay another once-popular song and take notice of its message: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." These lyrics were written and recorded years ago. Their message is up-to-date.



And it raises an urgent two-part question: *What is real love? And how can we move past our stubborn and subtle self-centeredness to put it on display?*

Are we suffering from a severe shortfall of real love, and is that our world's worst problem? That's one disturbing question. Here are two more: Do we even know what real love is, or has our culture, including our Christian culture, bought into a distorted counterfeit? And is it possible that after Adam and Eve had their first fight (I assume there were many more), no one except Jesus has ever purely loved anyone? A dangerous question. If the answer is yes, then what hope is there for our world?

It's true, of course, that we all can name at least one or two people who do love uncommonly well. Several older men have clearly modeled for me what it means for a husband to love his wife. A remarkable woman I know quite well radiates selfless concern for others from a heart quietly obsessed with Jesus. And yet, in some circumstances and with certain people, the lingering corruption of self-centeredness makes itself visible, however faintly, in everyone, even the most mature.

Only one person in the history of the world ever perfectly loved the way God loves, for an obvious reason: He was (and is) God! Everyone other than Jesus, from Eden till now, in some way falls short of divine love every day. We all fall short of the glory of God, the *relational* glory of the God who is love.

That's the bad news. Here's the good news, and it comes in two parts. First, not only are we fully forgiven for all sin, including our relational sin, but God's Spirit is now at work to form Jesus in us so that we can grow to love the way He loves, never completely till heaven but meaningfully now. To everyone who recognizes and hates their self-centeredness, that's good news. Second, the more Christians resemble Jesus by how we relate, the more the world of Christians will go 'round in rhythm with God's good plan. Marriages will deepen, friendships will last, and our communities will reveal to a watching world a kind of love that only Jesus makes possible.

But none of that will happen unless we recognize how we, and I'm speaking of Christians, *don't* love like Jesus. That's the first step. But pride gets in the way. We preserve a favorable self-image by lowering the divine standard of love down to a manageable level. Be nice. Serve others. As missional Christians, do good things for needy people. Sacrifice a little for the sake of others. Be faithful in your marriage. Be there for your kids. Good! We can do that, and feel pretty good about the way we love.

Do we not know? *There is a better love!* It's the love Jesus put on display. By definition, love is *relational*, not merely doing good things for others but intimately relating to others so that they feel heard, seen, valued, and accepted at their worst, with a vision for who they could become. *By Christian definition, loving is relating in a way that quite literally pours the life of God from one soul into another.* And it's costly. Real love sacrifices what we most value for the sake of another, even for someone who treats us badly. Real love suffers what we most fear if it serves the well-being of another, including someone we have reason to fear. To the degree that we glimpse real love, and in its pure form it's visible only in Jesus, our shortfall becomes evident. But it is when we glimpse the beauty of this divine love that a desire to really love comes alive in our souls. It's what we were meant to do.

We quickly realize, however, that loving like Jesus does not come easily or naturally. Of course not. He was radically other-centered. By nature, we're radically self-centered. A battle is required. A difficult path must be followed. The most important battle is not between ourselves and others. Nor is it a battle to master communication skills or to avoid defensive reactions when others offend us in hopes that our offenders will applaud our commendable efforts and treat us better. The battle for a better love is fought *in* us, in everyone whose vision of real love is coming into enough focus to expose our sometimes subtle but always ongoing love of self. It's a battle that we *want* to enter when we experience a profound yearning to put Jesus on display by how we love.

What is this battle? What exactly is the better love that is worth battling for? What happens in us if, when we battle for a better love, those we love respond poorly? Is there joy in the journey if the journey is a lifelong battle? And which brings deeper joy, receiving blessings or giving love?

Three people I've recently spoken with come to mind, people with stories that are perhaps similar to or different from yours and mine, but like you and me they need answers to these and many other related questions. Let me introduce them to you, with changed names.

## The Unappreciated Pastor

For sixteen years, Mark has faithfully led his congregation as it grew from less than one hundred to now more than three hundred regular attendees. In all that time, he gladly made himself available for personal help at any hour. He felt called to *pastor*. With his wife, he had arranged dozens of social events designed to build close community, often and without complaint absorbing most of the expenses.

Mark loved to preach. He longed to bring God to his people through God's Word. Patiently, always wanting to be more effective, he had listened to criticisms of his preaching, usually presented as helpful suggestions to consider. "I think more real-life stories would make your sermons more interesting and inspiring." "The church we attended before we moved here was known for its careful expository ministry. More of that might really grow this church." "You don't talk much about social issues, like same-sex marriage and abortion. We really need to know what the Bible says about such matters."

A weary Mark told me, "It's getting really hard to love these people. I'm not even sure what that would mean. For now I mostly endure them with a pastor's smile on my face, though I did lose it last week with my worst regular critic and told him he had a bad attitude. Maybe he'll leave the church. I wouldn't miss him.

Am I just hopelessly insecure? I feel so unappreciated. I get one encouraging word for every two dozen criticisms. I'm not sure if I'm bitter, maybe just a bad pastor, or really tired. But I am sure that I'm not loving these people very well. Any ideas?"

### **The Self-Protected Wife**

Sandy had been married before, for twenty years. She knew that the Bible said somewhere that God hates divorce, so she endured two long decades of nearly every kind of abuse. With the support of a new pastor who came to her church, she finally divorced her husband and, after five years as a single, remarried.

She asked me, "Do I have some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder? I've been married now for three years to a really wonderful guy. He's nothing at all like my first husband. But sometimes I explode in anger at him over the smallest things. It seems like I'm protecting myself from even the possibility of any more pain. My heart is so raw. I want to love my husband well, but I don't. I've walled myself off from him to keep myself safe, even from his genuine affection and kindness. Will I ever be free to really love him, or anyone else for that matter?"

### **The Yearning Disciple**

I know Chuck pretty well and think he's a great guy. His wife and his adult kids think so too. So does everyone who knows him. And he loves the Bible. When he guest preaches, folks who sometimes skip church don't.

He met me for lunch yesterday, looking troubled. He got right into it. "I really do love my family and friends. And I love God and His Word. But the more I meet Jesus in the Gospels, the more I realize I don't love anyone the way He loves everyone. I don't think I'm feeling pressure to love better, I just want to. Larry, I've been in spiritual

direction now for more than a year, nearly every week for an hour. And I'm experiencing God's presence more deeply. I'm grateful.

But here's what's bothering me. I'm not growing in the way I love people. I'm coming to recognize so many self-serving motives in me as I talk to my wife and kids, or anybody else. Even when I preach, I'm sometimes more aware of how I'm being received than whether the Spirit is speaking through me. I know I'll always have mixed motives. The flesh-Spirit battle will go on till I die. But I could love better. I long to love well. Is there some path I'm missing that would lead me into a better kind of love?"



Like me, each of these people is struggling to love well. You've heard their stories. What's yours? Where do you wish you could relate less impatiently, less guardedly, and more freely and genuinely, even with people you can't easily like? If you're looking for a spiritual method to get your "love act" together, this book will be no help. Again like me, you will never get it right, not until heaven. For now, celebrate God's grace not only when you succeed in loving well but also when you fail, and you'll enter the battle for a better love.

I've written this book to think through what it means to really love and to explore the truth that sets us free to relate closer to the way we wish we could, to love like Jesus. As you journey with me in the following pages, and as I share something of my path to loving more like Jesus, think about your relationships and the circumstances in which you find yourself. *What would it mean for you to battle for a better love?*

Let me suggest a few thoughts to get us started.

- The battle for a better love can only be fought on what the Lord referred to as the narrow road. We need to find that road and get on it.
- Every battle confronts an enemy. The enemy we encounter on the narrow road is our devil-inspired, world-shaped tendency

## *Prologue*

to arrange for our well-being at the expense of others, often by the way we relate. Relational sin, often unrecognized and usually subtle, is a vicious enemy; perhaps it's our worst.

- Those who live on the narrow road discover happiness—not always the familiar pleasant feelings that come when life goes our way but rather soul happiness, a weighty anchor that sustains us with hope and joy as we live to love.
- Our desire to experience God's presence is satisfied most fully when we express God's character most clearly by how we relate.
- Prayer is an essential weapon in the battle. The kind of prayer that pours out of us as we walk the narrow road doesn't center on the good things we legitimately want, such as good health and a decent job or even a happy family and good friends. It rather meaningfully and passionately asks God's Spirit, at any cost to ourselves, to make us little Christs who reveal the Father's heart to the world by the way we love.

What the world needs now is for the church of Jesus Christ to join together in Spirit-led community as we battle for a better love. I pray this book will help show the way.

# Introduction

Nothing in today's world, including our church world, has suffered more serious distortion than our understanding of love. And for good reason. Undistorted love, sacrificially pouring yourself out for the sake of others, carries with it an unexpected and heavy cost. Jesus is the ultimate example. The cost He paid to love us, in Gethsemane and on Calvary, was heavy enough to surprise even Him.

And nothing in modern culture has been more weakly defined than happiness, that rare inner awareness of a quietly contented sense of well-being that we cannot help but long to experience. And that fact, that we cannot extinguish our desire to be happy, suggests that perhaps we were created by a happy God to be happy—to be happy *like* God.

But most of us settle for less. We prefer to enjoy the good feelings that rise up within us when we are noticed, wanted, and respected by others; when things go well in our lives, according to our plans; and when we do fun things. We then often demand whatever produces the good feelings we want and feel bad when our demands go unmet.

Let's call those good feelings "second thing happiness." That kind of happiness is good and rightly enjoyed, when available. I like feeling loved by my family and friends. I feel good when my doctor tells me the surgery went well. I enjoy playing golf, more so when my drive

finds the fairway. But my desire for second thing happiness leaves me dependent on things beyond my control in order to feel good.

“First thing happiness” is entirely different. It feels different and its source is different. First thing happiness, in God’s thinking a better kind of happiness, develops when we struggle to love others with a costly love that is possible only if we have a life-giving relationship with Jesus that is grounded entirely in His love for us. This love lets us rest, not complacently but comfortably, in our ongoing weakness and failure.

But there’s a problem—actually many. Here’s one. The notion that the happiness we most long to know comes from loving others sacrificially, the way Jesus loved us when He was crucified, is too easily heard as a worthy ideal that is more romantic than realistic. Loving others with their well-being in view at any cost to us is a lovely thought, but when others treat us poorly or when life gets too rough that kind of love seems unworkable, too difficult, and really quite foolish. It’s time then to protect ourselves, to look out for our own immediately felt well-being. If we’re to be happy, or at least safe, self-protection makes more sense than self-sacrifice. So we think.

Anita came to a conference I led on learning to love like Jesus and left deeply stirred. “I can see now that I’ve felt entitled to hold a grudge against my husband for treating me like I barely exist,” she said. “His neglect really hurts me, but I want to put Jesus on display by the way I treat him. I’m so excited to get home.”

A month later, I received this email from her:

Larry, I tried. But it didn’t work. My husband hasn’t changed one bit. He seems even more irritable toward me. And the happiness you talked about at the conference never came. If I don’t back away to protect myself from him I think I’d die. I’m sorry, but I just can’t love this man. He hurts me too much.

My follow-up phone conversation with Anita made two things clear. First, she was assuming that Jesus-like love meant no confrontation,



not letting her husband know the impact he was having on her. Second, she expected to feel a kind of happiness that would eliminate whatever hurt she felt from her husband's angry indifference. If she loved him, she assumed either he would begin treating her well or God would miraculously provide a joy that would drown her sorrow. She had a difficult time appreciating that the happiness the Spirit provides when we love like Jesus exists *beneath* the hurt another causes us. It is a happiness experienced as a solid sense of "mission accomplished," of delighting God by revealing to others the love He displayed to the world through His Son.

Nothing in today's world, including our church world, has been more lamentably treated as fiction, if it is even considered, than the God-arranged connection between loving others and finding happiness. If Jesus is our model, then loving others sacrificially generates a kind of happiness, an awareness of destiny fulfilled, that remains alive even when life is unjustly difficult and our hearts feel empty and alone. Jesus, the Man of Sorrows. Was He happy? Yes, with a kind of happiness most of us are unaware we want. More on that later.

Loving like Jesus, self-sacrificially and not self-protectively, produces first thing happiness. If we think we're loving others and don't experience something identifiable as joy, it would be good to wonder if we're really loving anybody.

What exactly do sincerely caring parents mean when they tell their children "we just want you to be happy"? Are they perhaps wanting to feel good because their children feel good? What then happens to their happiness if their children fail or rebel, or become depressed or angry? How are Christian spouses thinking about love and happiness when they say to themselves, *I am so unhappy in my marriage. I know Jesus wants me to love my spouse. But I don't. I can't. I'm hurting too much.* Is happiness available to a spouse in a marriage that doesn't get better?

How does a distorted view of love and a weak understanding of happiness encourage us to respond when a close friend betrays us

or in some other way hurts us deeply? Is our happiness dependent on that friend repenting? Second thing happiness is. But is there a way to love our unloving friend that releases in us a happiness not dependent on the response we understandably desire from another?

One more scenario. Does Jesus actually intend that we love a parent who for years has been nothing but annoying, sometimes abusive? Did He really command us to love a parent we would just as soon never see again, a parent who never meaningfully parented us? Is that possible, or even good? If we graciously smiled and simply put up with the hurt we feel, would it not just enable the self-addicted parent the same way we would enable an alcoholic by kindly pouring him another drink?

Or is there a new way to love that parent, a way that would provide God's Spirit access into that mother's or father's heart and at the same time leave us happy whether our parent received the Spirit's work or not? If our view of love is distorted and our understanding of happiness is weak, what we might imagine it would mean to love that parent would be impossible—or at least unreasonable and foolish. And our hope for happiness in that relationship would lie in our parent learning to love us well.

### **Three Groups**

The questions I am raising come down to these:

- Is there a kind of love, a better kind, that brings joy when it is given, not when it meets with a satisfying response from another?
- Is there a kind of happiness that survives both the most damaging relational pain caused by another and the most discouraging and devastating of circumstances?
- Is there a connection, a cause-effect relationship, between offering undistorted love and experiencing strong happiness?

- Is Jesus-like happiness experienced as a good feeling, or is it better known as a living and sustaining reality, an awareness of both loving life as it should be lived and a freedom to do so?

As I prepare to engage these questions in this book, three groups of people come to mind.

### *Group 1*

This group contains those who, in response to disappointing relationships or difficult circumstances, live most days with low or high levels of misery. These folks experience neither first nor second thing happiness. They are simply unhappy most of the time and often just miserable.

You likely belong in this group if the way you are being treated by someone who matters to you leaves you feeling angrily and protectively defensive, in your own eyes deservedly determined to be treated fairly, and by your own reckoning justifiably diminished in your enthusiasm to be there for anyone more than for yourself. Perhaps shattered dreams have left you grumpily or nobly resigned to living as a self-pitying victim in an unjust world.

To you I say: *walk the narrow road to life*. If you know Jesus and therefore possess a nature made of the same stuff as God's nature, you can discover a kind of happiness that can be yours even if nothing outside of you changes. But you must learn what it means to walk the narrow road that Jesus said leads to life. Only then will you enjoy the fruit of loving well.

### *Group 2*

These people have lives that are going well enough to supply them with a regular dose of second thing happiness. You might belong in this group if you experience yourself as generally happy, as someone who most often feels pretty good. You don't need to know Jesus to

belong to this group, though many assume that they know Jesus *because* they belong to this group, because they enjoy life and feel good.

Your membership in group 2 is confirmed if, when asked why you are happy, your mind naturally goes to the blessings you enjoy, perhaps a chipper disposition or a fulfilling ministry or a satisfying marriage or an important job or financial stability or good health or close friends.

To you I say: *I'm glad for you*. Blessings are good. They are God's provision. Second thing happiness is meant to be enjoyed. But the happiness of blessings is both fickle and dangerous. It is a tenuous happiness that continues only if relationships and circumstances continue to go well. And blessings, though rightly appreciated, are dangerous, as is the happiness they provide. A blessed life might encourage you to settle for enjoying less than what God has made available to you. A pleasant life requires only pleasant love to enjoy.

A difficult life requires costly love, a better one that brings peace in the middle of storms. Suffering has unique power to put you in touch with undistorted love, the kind that has opportunity to come more alive when relationships sour and circumstances unravel. Too often, a blessed life leaves distorted love unrecognized and unchallenged.

Consider a new way to understand both love and happiness, a way that will move you onto the narrow road where you will no longer depend on life's blessings for your happiness, though you will still gratefully enjoy them. Instead you will discover undistorted love, a way to love that lets you know the happiness of Jesus.

### *Group 3*

This group of people live with a consuming thirst for living water. These folks know that living water bubbles up within them when it pours out of them into others. From experience they know the refreshing water that flows into them from others will reach deep into their hearts but ultimately fail to quench their deepest thirst,

and therefore will leave them more thirsty for satisfaction that seems less available.

You belong in this group if you long to enjoy who God is and who He is to you more than you enjoy anyone or anything else. Your identity in group 3 is confirmed if you celebrate who God is by wanting to reveal Him to others and by pouring His love into others, even though doing so sometimes deepens an already deep emptiness within you, an emptiness that intensifies your thirst for God.

In your embraced emptiness and welcomed thirst, you experience a greater freedom to love with no expectation that your emptiness or thirst will be fully relieved but rather with the expectation that in your unrelieved emptiness and thirst there is a way to be happy. You come to realize that it is your *thirst* for God that sustains you in your commitment to love others more than your *experience* of God. You enjoy God's presence now only in measure. Only in heaven, when you see Christ face-to-face, will you experience His beauty with unmeasured delight. The greater your enjoyment of Him in this life, the more passionately you thirst *now* to experience more of His beauty until *then*, when your deepest thirst will be forever quenched. Sustaining thirst for God is a sure mark of a group 3 Christian.

To you I say: *thank God for His work in your life*. Distorted love, the kind that not only excuses but justifies self-protective relating, is giving way to undistorted love, to the costly love of self-sacrifice that reveals God's nature and the way He relates. The cost is real, but the cost is worth it. You are coming to know the power of kingdom living, of loving in a way that brings God's relational kingdom into your sphere of influence.

You may at times experience a worrisome distance from those you love. But that felt distance may not be evidence that your love is weak; rather it likely reveals that your love is strong enough to require no satisfying response from others in order for your love to continue pouring into them. What passes for intimacy in our culture,

both secular and religious, is too often little more than receiving from another what we demand. True intimacy develops when true love is offered, the kind that desires but doesn't demand a response.

For no apparent reason, your feeling of love and your desire to love will sometimes fade. It is then that your will to love will become singularly necessary. It was will that kept Jesus on the cross. Exercise that will, and slowly but reliably you will know the happiness that Jesus knew, in small but sustaining measure. You will then gratefully and with delight realize that you are on the narrow road to life.



Distorted love delivers a fragile and narcissistic happiness. Correcting this distortion is resisted for good reason: undistorted love, a love that sacrifices one's self for the well-being of others, allows no illegitimate self-protection and thus makes us vulnerable to pain we could avoid.

Undistorted love is worth fighting for. It is divine love, the love of God revealed in both His three-Person community and in His gospel, a love that when alive in us embraces self-sacrifice as a privileged opportunity. We learn to surrender lesser pleasures, the demand to experience second thing happiness, in order to make room for the first thing happiness that emerges when we love like Jesus, when we relate to others in a way that delights God and enlivens our souls. Intimacy with God, the enjoyment of His presence, develops to a significant degree as we learn to love like God.

This book is about the battle for a better love, the struggle to love others with undistorted love that brings with it both suffering and happiness. It is a battle that will not be fully won until heaven. And the battle will only be productively engaged in this world if we walk the narrow road to life. But we must be clear. *It is a battle.* And I invite you to join me in the discussion of what it means to find that road and walk on it as we battle to love.

## One More Introductory Note: Are Happiness and Joy Different?

I will be using the words *happiness* and *joy* interchangeably throughout this book. Is that legitimate or not? Do those words refer to one experience or two? The question needs an answer. Let me provide one: yes . . . and no! It depends on how you define the terms.

If the question interests you, read on. If not, skip to the next chapter.

In most Christian circles, the answer is an immediate yes: the two are different. Happiness, it is commonly assumed, has a different source than joy, and the *feeling* of happiness is not at all the same as the *experience* of joy. Most of us understand happiness to be the always pleasant, sometimes elated, occasionally giddy emotion we feel when our lives are going well, when good news comes our way.

Joy, we think, is different. It is not a pleasurable feeling generated by desirable circumstances. Joy is more than an itch finally scratched, more than a request granted or a wish fulfilled. In its deepest and most spiritual form, joy is thought to be the anchoring reality of being able, with conviction, to say *it is well with my soul* not because life is unfolding in a way that is to our liking but because we trust the God whose loving presence we meaningfully experience.

Given that understanding, the answer to the question is an unarguable yes: happiness and joy are different. But something I've observed gives me pause with this answer: neither seemingly happy nor joyful Christians reliably love well.

Some do, of course, but many don't, not like Jesus. It seems to me that a predictable relationship should exist between both happiness and joy and the ability to love well. Think about it. If joy is delighting in the felt presence of a loving God, then the experience of joy should reveal itself in the way we love others. Sometimes it does. Some Christians who report that they experience real joy in

being loved by God gladly pour that same love into others. Some don't.

And happy Christians, freed from worry by the enjoyment of blessings, might be expected to concern themselves with the well-being of others. Sometimes they do. But neither happy Christians who enjoy their lives nor joyful Christians who enjoy God's presence reliably love others, at least not with the costly love of Jesus.

The Christians I know who love in ways that make me yearn to love with a better love—their number is few and one in particular comes to mind—deeply feel the unhappiness that accompanies shattered dreams and, regrettably too often, sense God's absence when they most long to feel His presence. They understand what John of the Cross meant when he spoke of dark nights of the soul. As we commonly define happiness and joy, these few Christians frequently experience neither. *And yet they evidence a stronger commitment to the well-being of others than to their own.*

The man who comes to my mind illustrates this point. Soon after a terrible tragedy in his family, I spoke with him. He shared the depths of his unhappiness and his longing to know God in ways he had not yet experienced. But quickly, without denying his thirsty anguish, he poured his energy into knowing how I was doing. Happy Christians seem more inclined to revel in their happiness than to explore the world of another. Similarly, joyful Christians sometimes talk more of their experiences of God than, with loving curiosity, wonder about the spiritual journey of others.

Ask my loving but unhappy and joyless friend (unhappy and joyless according to our usual definitions) if he knows the happiness of Jesus, and he quietly answers, "Yes." Ask him if he knows the Spirit's fruit of joy, and with restful certainty he replies, "Of course." *What does he mean?*

Is it possible to know the happiness of Jesus by loving like Jesus even when we experience little, perhaps nothing, of His presence? Can we feel contentedly settled with the awareness of realized destiny,



of fulfilling our life's purpose as Christians called to bring the light of divine love into the dark places of another's soul, even when the darkness of loneliness and sorrow overwhelms ours?

From personal experience, I understand why unhappy Christians plagued by difficult circumstances and painful relationships have little interest in someone else's problems when theirs feel so consuming. And again from personal experience, I appreciate how unnatural it is to be there for others when the sense of God's absence generates the darkness of despair. And yet as Jesus hung on the cross, He did exactly that! With neither the happiness of pleasant circumstances nor the joy of experiencing His Father's gentle presence, Jesus chose to endure torture of body and soul that one nod toward heaven would have immediately ended. Why? Why not a pain-ending nod? Because *He was committed to my well-being at any cost to Himself, all to reveal the glory of His Father's unfathomable love.* "We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us" (1 John 3:16).

Can I ever love like Jesus? What will it take? Was it redefined happiness and joy that empowered Him to love so sacrificially? Was Jesus happy not only when He provided wine at a wedding but also while nails were pounded into His hands and feet? Was He joyful not only after His resurrection but also during His crucifixion? In our natural way of understanding happiness and joy, the answer is an obvious and loud no. He endured the cross. In no sense did Jesus enjoy either the torture of crucifixion or the devastating absence of His Father. But there is a way to understand happiness and joy that has been long forgotten and is radically unique.

A truth I will explore throughout the pages of this book is both simple and profound: *Jesus's happiness and joy came from giving Himself.* Is giving ourselves really the path to the joy we most want? Would I long to truly love if I understood that truth, and if I then longed to know His happiness and joy?

I'm told the early Greek philosophers defined happiness as living congruently with one's deepest nature. Would that define joy as well?

Certainly that is exactly how Jesus lived. In Him we get an up-front view of God's essential nature of *outwardness*, the glad passion to share with others the pleasure He knows, the pleasure only Jesus can provide. Jonathan Edwards once wrote that the entire purpose of the gospel is to communicate the happiness of Jesus to His followers, to deliver His nature of outwardness into the center of our being, and to then guide us onto the narrow road of relating congruently with that divine passion, no longer always curved in on ourselves but increasingly often poured out for others.

Is it possible, then, to know God, to experience the beauty of divine love, and to *not* reveal some significant measure of Christ's suffering, self-denying outwardness by how we relate?

Listen to the apostle John's answer. "Anyone who claims to live in God's light and hates a brother or sister is still in the dark" (2:9 MSG). In John's mind, the absence of love suggests the presence of hate. And our answer must be no. If we experience God's love, it is impossible not to, in some measure, express God's love to another. To do so may involve a battle, but it's a battle the beloved of God will enter.

*Inwardness*, a priority commitment to my own felt well-being that only when honored frees me to care about you, too often passes for love. It is not. Inwardness falls woefully short of the relational beauty of God's outwardness. Outwardness is love, self-denial for the sake of another. Inwardness is hate, self-love that eclipses love for others.

If a follower of Jesus claims to know God, to experience the presence of Jesus, but relates more inwardly than outwardly, that person's claim is suspect. Their experience of joy is counterfeit. Their feeling of happiness is no different than the happiness of a non-Christian whose life is going well.

The question now comes to a head: What is joy, and is it different than happiness? Some redefinition seems necessary. Joy, the fruit only of God's Spirit, depends for its existence neither on pleasurable circumstances nor on rich experiences of God's presence. *The*

*joy of fellowship with the Trinity develops when we relate like the Trinity as Jesus is formed in us by His Spirit.*

And happiness that exists only when life treats us well, though properly welcomed, is second thing happiness. It is not the deep happiness of Jesus that we can know in this life. Consider the sources of second thing happiness.

- *Life goes well.* Blessings overflow. We feel happy.
- *We do well.* We achieve a long-desired goal. We feel happy.
- *We experience God's presence.* Perhaps through worship music, time in the Bible, or the practice of spiritual disciplines, we sense that God is with us. We feel happy. We may call it joy.

But if the emotions aroused by any of the above sources do not lead us into the battle for a better love, the love revealed in the crucified Jesus, we have not yet tasted the deep happiness and the true joy of Jesus. We are experiencing only second thing happiness. It is right to enjoy the feeling. It is wrong to call it joy.

Not only a different kind of joy but also a different kind of happiness, first thing happiness, is available to those who follow Jesus onto the narrow road. It animates the soul of a Christian who, living loved, *therefore lives to love*. It is the fruit of God's Spirit. It is joy. It is happiness of the first thing variety. Defined this way, the two are one. The *experience* of God's love that results in the *expression* of God's love brings joy, first thing happiness. Jesus lived what He taught: "You're far happier giving than getting" (Acts 20:35 MSG).

Perhaps now that question can be answered: Are happiness and joy different?

Second thing happiness or felt pleasure that comes with the blessings of life, including the wonderful blessing of being treated well by others, the achievement of goals, or the felt experience of God's presence, is legitimate and legitimately enjoyed. But it is not joy. *Yes, second thing happiness and joy are different.*

First thing happiness, realized purpose that comes with knowing the better love of Jesus in a way that inflames a burning desire and an enlivening thirst to pour that better love into others, is experienced as the anchoring reality of joy when that desire is indulged, when we love like Jesus. The experience of God becomes true joy when we express God's outward nature by how we relate. *No, first thing happiness and joy are not different.* They are the same, one Spirit-granted reality.

Christians are thirsty both to know God and to reveal God. The pursuit of knowing God as He is in His eternal community and of knowing what He is doing in this disappointing and difficult world generates an insatiable thirst to make known to others who He is and what He is up to.



All that to say this: in this book, when I speak of the happiness available to Jesus followers who walk the narrow road to relational life, unless I specify that I'm referring to second thing happiness that sometimes accompanies travelers on the narrow road, know that I am speaking of the first thing happiness released in us when we battle for a better love. That kind of happiness is unmistakably the Spirit's doing. It is joy.

# Three Passages to Ponder As You Now Explore the Message of This Book

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Jesus

Don't tell us what is right. Tell us nice things. Tell us lies. Forget all this gloom. Get off your narrow path. Stop telling us about your "Holy One of Israel."

The Many


The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life." . . . I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me. But each day the LORD pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to God who gives me life.

The Few<sup>1</sup>

PART 1

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THE GOOD NEWS  
THAT SOUNDS BAD



*Follow Me.*

Where will You take me?

*To real life.*

How will I get there?

*I will lead you on a rough road.*

Isn't there an easier way?

# 1

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## Does Anyone Want to Be Happy, Like Jesus?

Not too many years ago, in the church my younger son's family then attended, I was meeting with the elders, church staff, and worship team before the Sunday service. I was the guest preacher. After the order of service was outlined and before we prayed, the pastor, a good friend who knew me well, introduced me to the group.

“Most of you are familiar with Dr. Crabb. I know many of you have read a few of his books. One of our Sunday school classes is right now studying his popular but challenging *Shattered Dreams*. He told me earlier this morning that the title he's given to his sermon today is ‘Happiness in the Christian Life.’”

He then paused. With a straight face and with no attempt at either sarcasm or humor, he added, “You probably realize that Dr. Crabb is not known for that topic, so I'm sure we'll all be eager to hear his thoughts on what it means to be happy. It might be good if we spent some time in prayer now, for Dr. Crabb and for what we're about to hear.”

If you are at all familiar with my earlier work, you know that for forty years I've been exploring the dark side of life, our troubled existence in this mixed-up world. I've thought hard about our love of sin and the heartaches that result, as well as tragedies that have no apparent explanation. And I've treated life's struggles as opportunities to know God better, to be spiritually formed no matter what may be happening in us or to us or around us. I've wanted to understand how a good God uses all that is bad in our lives to make us holy.

I'm not known, and I've never wanted to be, for encouraging people to be happy *as most of us commonly understand happiness*. I'm glad for the happiness people, including me, experience while vacationing at Disney World or at a beachfront resort, or when family, friendships, health, and finances are all doing well. But that kind of happiness—second thing happiness—can erode the desire to pay whatever price is required to know God so well that we discover first thing happiness, the true joy that develops only as we love like Jesus.

Let me be as clear as I can be about one thing: loving like Jesus means loving people while they sin and not loving them more when they celebrate victory over some specific sin. But let me be clear about one more thing: even the most spiritual among us will never love exactly like Jesus in this life.

And when we fail badly to love well, God does not love us less. He is then glorified as the God whose grace is so amazing that it is always provided, whether we love well or not. But the more we celebrate His grace that loves us at our worst, the more we will long to battle for the better love we receive from Jesus.

It follows that our richest happiness depends not on loving like Jesus but on knowing we are loved with extravagant grace by Jesus. And the more we rest in His inexplicable love, the more God's Spirit, in His time, will release us to show that grace to others and the more happiness we will experience.

My fond hope—and I think it is realistic—is that one day someone will suggest the following epitaph to be engraved on my tombstone:



Here lies a man who all his life was preoccupied with what it means to be happy like Jesus.

From my early days of ministry as a young psychologist, I've believed that because God is love God is happy, and I've thought for a long time that a relationship exists between loving others and being happy. I've confidently assumed that somehow God is happy, supremely happy, with a happiness He wants me to enjoy, a happiness He enjoys in spite of the suffering that His love for people like me inevitably brings.

More recently, I've come to see something that surprised me: the happy God of suffering love is happy *while He suffers*. Even more remarkably and with sober excitement, I've been persuaded that, at least in part, He experiences a certain kind of happiness *because He suffers*. Certainly He was happy in eternity past when in His divine community there was no suffering. But a deep happiness always alive within each member of the Trinity was revealed when God created people to love who then turned away from Him. It is in His experience of suffering that His unique passion of love is most fully revealed.

It is making fresh sense to me to understand, only a little and from a great distance, that it is the willingness to suffer for the happiness of another, even for others who are foolishly seeking their happiness elsewhere, that reveals the extraordinary nature and unfathomable depths of divine love.

In the gospel, Jesus came to tell us the good news that God wants every follower of Jesus to be happy with the happiness of Jesus, and that He is willing to pay any price required to make that happiness available. Not only did Jesus die to make it available but He lived to reveal what it looks like for a human being to know the happiness that comes from relating to others with divine love, even when living in a world stained by human misery brought on by human self-centeredness.

It is vitally important that we gain a clear understanding, albeit limited, of the happiness of Jesus that is now available to us and how we must love in order to enjoy it.

Ever since Jesus came into this world as a human being, lived in a way that put divine love on display in human relating, died to reveal the depths of that love, was resurrected so that He could pour divine love into our human hearts, and then returned to heaven to make room for His Spirit to come into us in a new way, something breathtaking has been going on. It's happening right this moment.

Right now the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of the love that makes the Father and Son one in delight and purpose, is making available to every Christian the happiness Jesus knew:

- *when* He danced with the wedding guests at Cana as they were enjoying the fine wine He supplied. We're not told Jesus danced, but if the wedding guests were dancing, I assume He joined in. Picture Jesus dancing, holding a glass of wine. It's a good image.
- *when* He wept at the tomb of Lazarus, feeling angry that death was now part of life. Then, I imagine with a big smile, Jesus welcomed Lazarus as he walked out of his grave when Jesus told him to.
- *when*, feeling deeply disappointed, Jesus spoke firmly but gently to the three disciples who had fallen asleep after He had asked them to share His sorrow over His impending crucifixion.
- *when*, soon after, He looked at Peter with eyes filled with forgiveness, compassion, and hope, into the eyes of the brash, self-confessed loyal follower of Jesus who had just betrayed Him three times.
- *when*, even when, He was mercilessly whipped and then nailed to a cross to die a slow, horrific death.
- *when* He shouted "It is finished!" then told His Father He was coming home.

- *when* He amazed His grieving disciples by greeting them on the first Easter morning, having died on Friday and now revealed to be alive on Sunday.
- *when* He promised to always be with His disciples as they paid a stiff price to make more disciples of Jesus.
- *when*, now seated at the Father's right hand, He continues to tell His story of suffering love through you and me as we share in His happiness by loving as He did.

Pause for a moment. Could that be true? Was Jesus truly *happy* in each of those circumstances? If so, and I believe He was, then why? And what kind of happiness did He experience? It seems preposterously unthinkable to claim that Jesus was in any sense happy as He hung on the cross, especially during those dreadful three hours of darkness when all felt awareness of His Father's loving presence had vanished. Whatever kind of happiness He knew in those moments is not the kind of happiness I naturally want. The happiness of relieved pain and enjoyed blessings has more appeal.

But consider this. If Jesus was always filled with and ruled by the Holy Spirit's passion of undistorted love, the kind that finds joy in suffering for others, and if the fruit of the Spirit includes joy, then we must conclude the unthinkable: always, in His pleasant moments at the Cana wedding and in His suffering moments on Calvary, *Jesus knew the happiness that accompanies suffering love.* (See appendix for a discussion of the question: Was Jesus filled with God's Spirit when His Father abandoned Him on the cross?)

We must be clear. Jesus endured no suffering as a helpless, unwilling victim. He was always willing and therefore not primarily a victim at all but rather a free agent choosing to suffer on behalf of people who were unworthy of His love. It is that kind of love, undistorted by self-centeredness, that brings the happiness we were created to enjoy even in the darkest night.

This is radical stuff. To be happy with the happiness of Jesus, then, means to know happiness can coexist with the worst anguish a human can experience. But this happiness comes only if we express the sacrificial love of Jesus at the same time as we endure anguish. Let me state the obvious: we need to profoundly redefine both what it means to be happy with the happiness that was always alive in Jesus and what it means to love others with undistorted love, the way Jesus loved. We need to get in touch with our deep desire to love like Jesus and to be happy like Jesus.



I see this book as the next installment in the story I've been longing to tell for nearly half a century. The story is a good one. Perhaps I've told it poorly but I know this story lets us hear good news straight from heaven—the good news, for followers of Jesus as they live in this world, that in any circumstance of life, no matter how difficult or terrifying, and in any condition of soul, no matter how empty or alone, disciples of Jesus can know His happiness. This happiness arises from Jesus's love and sustains us in putting His love on display by how we relate to others. The happiness of Jesus can be ours if we fight the battle to love, a battle that can be won, never fully till heaven but substantially now, only on the narrow road.

Perhaps one day I'll be known as a happy disciple of Jesus, someone who learned a little of what it means to love like Jesus. I'll then surprise no one when I announce that I'll be preaching on happiness in the Christian life. I want to experience that reality, and if it advances God's purposes, to be known as someone who does.