

FOREWORD BY GREG LAURIE

JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON

UNLEASHING  
PEACE

EXPERIENCING

GOD'S SHALOM

IN YOUR PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

# UNLEASHING PEACE

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IN YOUR PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON



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For Lily Faith Johnston

Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say “My tooth is aching” than to say “My heart is broken.”

—C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

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# FOREWORD

**M**any people today have a flawed perspective of God. For some reason—whether it be bad experiences in their past, false teaching, or just misconceptions that our culture has reinforced—they would label God as authoritarian, distant, critical, angry, disconnected, judgmental, or vindictive. They see God as someone who is just waiting for them to screw up so that he can punish them.

How incredibly sad.

The true God—the God of the Bible—is a God who is happy and who wants us to be happy too. In fact, since we are made in his image, you could almost say we have been prewired for happiness. We are prewired for hope. We are prewired for peace.

Does that mean Christians should always go around with a phony smile plastered on their faces? Of course not. Christians experience deep loss, pain, and heartache, just like other people. But the happiness, hope, and peace that I'm referring to go deeper than just emotion. Feelings come and go, but the peace—the shalom—that you are going to read about in this book is a peace that passes

understanding and stems from a relationship with the One who created us. He is the Author of happiness, hope, and peace. He is the Source of wholeness and well-being.

When our son Christopher went to be with the Lord suddenly in a car crash more than a decade ago, I remember feeling complete and utter devastation—like I could curl up and die at that moment. In the days that followed, I felt profound sorrow and emptiness. I wept often and I wondered why God would allow such a thing to happen. As time has passed, the loss has remained, but the emotions have changed, softened, transformed into another kind of grief and aching. There is still sadness, but it is a different form of sadness. It’s something that my wife, Cathe, and I will never “get over.” It will remain part of our lives until we see Christopher again in heaven.

But I can honestly tell you that through all of it, the shalom of God—the peace and presence that Jesus Christ offers—was, and is, real and steadfast. The promises of Scripture that I had preached for so many years withstood the test of true-life experience and came through the fire as gold.

God’s peace is not dependent on circumstances. It is a deep and abiding assurance that God is true, that he is with us, and that he will make all things work together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose. The shalom of God is the assurance that he who started a good work in us will be faithful to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

We live in a world where people are desperate to experience the peace, the hope, and the happiness that only God can offer. They are broken, longing for healing and wholeness.

This is why I am so happy to commend to you this dynamic new book by my friend Jeremiah Johnston, *Unleashing Peace*. Jeremiah has the mind of a scholar but with a common touch to take the complex and make it understandable.

I pray that as you read this book, you will be equipped, energized, and inspired to share the gospel of peace with others.

*Foreword*

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.—Colossians 3:15 NIV

—Greg Laurie  
pastor and evangelist,  
Harvest Ministries

# The Most Important Question of Our Time

It was spring when I found myself on a flight from Houston to speak at a gathering for hundreds of pastors in central London. The Holy Spirit had been prompting me to address the biblical response to mental illness and anxiety. That's when I saw a photo I will never forget.

If you have spent any time at all walking the busy streets of greater London, you learn quickly that pedestrians do not have the right-of-way. If you try to cross a street, watch out! The North Circular Road near Golders Green in North London is no exception. The busy intersection features a large footbridge so walkers can cross above the heaving traffic below.

A photo of that bridge, along with a news story, had appeared in my in-box. The report said that around 5 p.m. local time, with rushing cars below, a man had made it out onto the outside ledge of the bridge, threatening to jump.

In an act of incredible compassion, at least a half dozen strangers—men and women making their way home from work

across the footbridge—quickly collapsed around the man. They would not let go of him. And that’s the photo I saw, of the heroic passersby holding the man for two hours until a hydraulic lift eventually lowered him to safety.<sup>1</sup>

The photo captured a display of love and determination to rescue. One of the first things that stands out is a yellow rope lassoed around the man. God works in mysterious ways—yes, someone evidently had a rope that particular day. Another person has their arms clutched through the bridge bars around the man’s calf muscles. Another individual is clasping the man’s belt. Finally, another man is seen an inch from his face, looking the man in his eyes. He appears to be saying something, and his arms are around the man’s neck and shoulders. Like the others, he will not let the man go.

For all we know, the strangers were not mental health experts. None of them knew each other before the incident. These good Samaritans saw a dire situation and immediately acted. A life was saved.

In my talk at the London event, I showed this photo, and the response was palpable. My message? God never gives up on anyone. We give up on people. God does not. We should never stop trying to save people from themselves.

It saddens me that the church is woefully behind in helping people with mental health issues, because every single person is somewhere on the mental wellness trajectory. Mental wellness is a conversation that includes all people of God. We should be the ones wrapping our arms around those with chronic worry, mood disorders, anxiety, anxiety attacks, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicidal thoughts. And whether we struggle with mental illness ourselves, or know someone who does, it affects us all. According to the World Health Organization, depression is now the leading cause of disability in the world.<sup>2</sup>

This is a global issue. It is an individual issue. And I believe it is the most important question the church can answer today: How can I find true happiness and peace?

We founded our ministry, Christian Thinkers Society, for the sole purpose of inspiring believers to follow the Great Commandment of Jesus: to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. The other side of our missional vision and objective is inspiring thinkers to become Christians. In other words, you don't need to check your brain at the door to become a follower of Jesus. Far too many Christians are soft targets for the ebbs and flows of skeptical, anti-God messaging. Christianity is not antithetical to education or thinking; in fact, the opposite is true. There is a persuasive body of truth that as the Christian faith has been passed along, people have thought deeply about it and it has become the foundation through which we address issues of the liberal arts, humanities, politics, philosophy, the arts, social sciences, natural sciences, media, journalism, and music—the whole spectrum. Why? Because all truth is God's truth.<sup>3</sup> Since all truth is, in fact, God's truth, we have a firm belief that any truth we find in the world can and will be reconciled with our faith.

Jesus' ministry to "seek and save the lost" was a restorative ministry. His restoration was certainly spiritual, but it did not stop there. The healing, forgiving, loving relationship Jesus won for us at the cross penetrates every aspect of our lives—spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally. These days, the popular term for that is wellness. The Global Wellness Institute defines *wellness* as the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health.<sup>4</sup> As I see it, Jesus was talking about and teaching wellness before anyone, but he used a different word: *shalom*—the best form of wellness there is.

Back to our bridge photo for a moment. Where are you on the bridge? If you're the person who is on their way to the outer ledge, I want you to know, you can be saved. Or, maybe you aren't feeling that depth of despair, but you feel beaten down and troubled, and long for relief and happiness. God's Word has great and precious

promises available for you right now. And if you consider yourself one of the individuals walking across that bridge, not needing help this moment but wanting to intervene and help someone who is struggling or even in crisis, this book has a message for you, too, with practical steps and the theological underpinnings to allow God to use you to unleash his peace and protective presence in the lives of those around you. No matter where you are on the bridge, there is a path to peace and joy and happiness.

In the pages that follow, I speak from my experience as a Bible scholar to clarify, teach, and expound on what the Bible actually says about how we think and specifically how we can renew our minds, which is a command given to us in Romans 12:1–2. I also clear up some “problem passages” from the Bible that are often misunderstood. Further, I highlight some frequently neglected passages that speak to God’s peace in our lives. I write to teach you how to unleash the shalom of God! If we are called to be Christian thinkers, it naturally follows that the Bible has much to teach us about right thinking. As such, this book should also be a resource for Christian leaders, pastors, and educators, Bible teachers, and Christian counselors, therapists, and psychologists, but by no means is it a replacement for these vital disciplines. The fact remains, we need more Bible scholars and theologians to bring biblical precision to the trending questions of our culture. It is sad that we often spend time answering questions at the seminary and higher education level that no one is asking in the real world.

The real problem we face is that people see Christianity as an answer to yesterday’s questions, and hence they think it offers no relevance today. What we need to do is translate our faith language into what C.S. Lewis calls the “cultural vernacular.”<sup>5</sup> We need to actually think about how we translate our faith language into today’s language but also answer the questions people are asking.

You should know that I never planned to write a book like this. But after I wrote a book called *Unanswered* to tackle people’s top questions rarely addressed in church, I was thanked most for addressing

suicide and mental health. As Christians, we need to build awareness of the problem and remove the stigma, because mental illness is widespread and affects everyone. A Lifeway Research survey found nearly 70 percent of pastors rarely or never address the subject of mental illness from their pulpits, and the same survey revealed that the majority of churchgoers wish their pastors would discuss it.<sup>6</sup> The satirical Christian website *The Babylon Bee* even highlighted the problem with a story headlined by “Nation’s Churches Announce Plan to Continue Ignoring Mental Health Issues”:

In a rare moment of interdenominational unity, the nation’s churches announced a plan to continue ignoring mental health issues among congregants. Despite increased awareness of mental health issues in the nation overall, hundreds of churches agreed not to do anything at all about the ongoing crisis in the country. “We vow to continue pretending mental health issues do not exist, and simply encouraging our members to pray the sadness away,” a representative for the coalition said Wednesday. “This truly is the best way to solve a problem: by pretending it doesn’t exist.”<sup>7</sup>

For more than a decade, our ministry’s presentations, conferences, media broadcasts, and other events have featured question-and-answer sessions. Partnering with churches across all denominations (and non-denominational), universities, and other apologetics and worldview ministries in the United States and internationally, has exposed me to the pressing questions from a wide context of the Christian faith.

It is clear we have missed the mark in passing on what I call a “theology of shalom” in our lives. God wants us to experience joy, and that’s what we experience when we have a faith in God that is guided by the facts of Scripture.

The words *joy* and *rejoice* appear almost three hundred times in Scripture. Several times in his letter to the Christians of Philippi, Paul speaks of joy and urges the people to rejoice. The psalmist

### For Ministry Leaders

Research shows that individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to seek help from clergy (a pastor, priest, or rabbi) before any other professional group, including mental health experts.<sup>8</sup> This reveals what you may already know: The church is central in the healing equation for the multitudes who are seeking peace and joy but struggling with anxiety. There is a great opportunity for Christian leaders and the global church to minister to the afflicted. That said, I have conducted scores of interviews with Christian leaders, and from my experience, many don't feel equipped to even know where to begin addressing the mental health crisis in our faith community. What's more, some don't feel capable or prepared to minister through this mental pain crisis because they themselves are barely coping and suffering in silence.

To show how relevant our faith is to the world around us, you need to be conversant in ministering in this space of mental wellness. If you lead Bible studies, teach Christian courses (at any level), coach young people, or practice ministry in any sphere, this book will equip you with the biblical tools to minister effectively.

says, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). And Jesus' famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5–7), is a theological blueprint presupposing peace and happiness (or shalom) that is sorely lacking in so many Christian lives today.

"Nothing so educates us as a shock," wrote historian Will Durant.<sup>9</sup> The church has been shocked in recent times by suicides not only of Christians in the pews but of prominent pastors and leaders, as well. Suicide claims more lives than war, murder, and natural

disasters combined.<sup>10</sup> And more years of life are lost to suicide than to any other single cause except heart disease and cancer.<sup>11</sup> I've noticed, though, that if we are not careful, we can develop a detached view of these grim statistics. Mother Teresa is known for saying, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." We must remember that behind all the statistics are very personal stories of "one," like the man on the bridge in North London.

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In the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "Shalom is not only an incredible gift, it is a most demanding mission."<sup>12</sup> How we come to not only understand the gift of shalom but live out shalom is central to following Jesus. This book charts a course for you.

In Part 1, you will learn the biblical principles for unleashing God's shalom into our lives. God wants us to be happy and at peace, constantly. *Happiness* is not a bad word for the follower of Jesus. Jesus describes a state of blessedness that could be interpreted as joy that includes laughing and giggling. Where did we get the idea that being a Christian means being a killjoy? The happy person is well—a healthier person. Proverbs 17:22 promises, "A merry heart does good, like medicine" (NKJV). This sense of delight and contentment extends vertically with God and horizontally with God's world around us. In Part 2, you will learn how to apply the wellness of shalom understanding by first understanding God's protective presence in our lives. God is our shield. Insofar as we understand God's protective presence, we will learn practically how to minister to those around us who are struggling in unwellness. In Part 3, you will learn about protecting the theology of shalom by answering some of the difficult passages in the Bible related to thinking and wellness, and maintaining shalom through the vicissitudes of life.

If you have felt alone in your pursuit of peace and happiness, I pray that through this book, you will feel seen and know that God cares about your pain and wants you to experience his shalom.