

CT REVIEW

BOOKS, MOVIES,
MUSIC, AND
THE ARTS



JONATHAN BARTLETT

Happiness Now!

We can grab hold of joy in this life, not just in heaven, says theologian Ellen Charry. By Katelyn Beaty

If you are a despondent American looking for a cure, the last place you'll find it is in the Christian section of your local Barnes & Noble. You may have better luck in a nearby section, where psychologists, billionaires, and Buddhist monks reveal the "source," "secret," or "path" to living a happy life, one that's eluded everyone but them. In recent months, Chris Guillebeau, blogger and self-avowed "fighter of the status quo," released *The Art of Non-Conformity* to remind readers to find happiness in remembering, "You don't have to live your life the way other people expect you to." Meanwhile, entrepreneur Michael Masterson published *The Pledge*,

which teaches that happiness is about creating life goals and working toward them—regardless of the merits of said goals. And Sharon Salzberg, in *Real Happiness*, combines Buddhist principles and Western neuroscience to teach that meditation is "the door to real and accessible happiness," all in just 28 days.

Amid the philosophies of the day, what explains the relative dearth of Christian teaching on happiness? Are we too busy toiling away at good ministry to remember that in our Lord's presence is "fullness of joy," that at his right hand "are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11, ESV)?

Do we even believe God wants us to be happy?

Ellen T. Charry says the Christian tradition has made room for happiness, but primarily in the next life, when believers will be united with God. In other words, the church has located happiness eschatologically—"any sorrow we face now pales in comparison to the joy that awaits." Charry, the Margaret W. Harmon Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Princeton Seminary, thinks this is misguided. In *God and the Art of Happiness* (Eerdmans) ★★★★★, she reframes Christian notions of happiness in two major ways: by defining happiness not primarily as an emotion but as a virtuous way of life, as did Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, and the classical philosophers they drew from; and by leaving room for happiness in this life, which wells up as God draws us closer to himself through Christ.

As in her previous works, notably *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, Charry writes from practical concern, especially for readers who wonder if life is "more than a vale of tears simply to be slogged through somehow in hopes of a heavenly reward." She wonders this herself, having recently lost her husband of 40 years to an "untimely and pointless death."

Like the Stoics and Neo-Platonists who deeply influenced him, Augustine doesn't eschew physical well-being (health, material goods), but he privileges spiritual well-being—that is, loving the triune God—as the root of happiness. As we learn to love

God rightly, we also learn to love ourselves, our neighbors, and material goods rightly, and this brings us enjoyment. Sanctification is not a toilsome march but a "healing journey into one's soul, for each step deeper into God heals and strengthens love." Charry says Augustine's "therapeutic soteriology," wherein being



saved means being healed, is central to a robust Christian doctrine of happiness. For Augustine and many theologians to follow (I think of the “Christian hedonist” John Piper), God’s glory is our personal delight.

Next, Charry introduces the obscure 6th-century philosopher Boethius, who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while in jail awaiting execution for treason. Given his unfortunate situation, Boethius uses a dialogue with Lady Philosophy to teach that happiness is not found in temporal circumstances but in staunchly trusting God’s sovereignty. “Happiness is enjoying being part of the divine plan,” says Charry, even amid painful experiences.

If Boethius’s teaching seems dour, Aquinas brightens things up. Charry says the Angelic Doctor “was the first Christian theologian to embrace temporal flourishing in this life by enjoying material goods.” Like Augustine, Aquinas teaches that loving God—more precisely, beholding him in the *beatific vision*—is both the means and ends of our happiness. But unlike Augustine, Aquinas thinks physical and spiritual well-being are positively linked. Enjoying friendships, bodily health, and honorable living can whet our appetites for enjoying God in the next life. (Aquinas makes clear that happiness comes

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only through divine grace; noting this, I wrote in the margins, “Non-Christians clearly enjoy these things—is this grace at work, or mere Epicurean distraction?”)

The final player Charry introduces is Joseph Butler, an 18th-century Anglican theologian who preached at a time when psychological egoism—the belief that people always act selfishly, even when they appear altruistic—had deeply influenced Western thought. Against this idea, famously espoused by Thomas Hobbes, Butler teaches that people naturally bend toward goodness, to obeying Scripture and conscience. And when people obey in this way, they love themselves.

Butler believes King David acted in an unnatural, “self-contradictory” way, since adultery and murder made him miserable. So, to obey God is to love both ourselves and others, since “when we advance our own best interest we contribute to the well-being of

the polis,” explains Charry.

Butler’s teachings play a central role in the second half of the book, where Charry names her happiness project: *asherism*. As well as the name given to Jacob’s second son (Gen. 30:13), *asher* is Hebrew for “blessed.” Charry calls it “godly self-enjoyment”: “Happiness is enjoying God, creation, and self by cultivating the wisdom behind divine commands that enable one to become an instrument of the world’s flourishing.” It is not about good emotions or having needs met but about loving God and obeying him, which Jesus teaches are one and the same (John 14:15).

Asherist themes feature prominently in the Torah. God calls Israel to love him and keep his covenant, which he says will bless the young nation in all areas of its corporate life (Deut. 7:9–16). Many Psalms—Charry lists 32—describe the joy of being God’s people and following his decrees. “For the

MY TOP 5 BOOKS ON C.S. LEWIS

By Michael Ward, author of *The Narnia Code* (Tyndale, 2010)

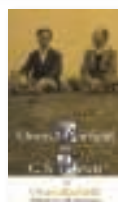


C.S. LEWIS

A Complete Guide to His Life & Works

WALTER HOOPER (HARPERONE)

This volume contains a brief biography, full of fact and only necessary comment. It also includes summaries of Lewis’s main works, sections on key ideas and people, and a comprehensive list of all Lewis’s writings.



OWEN BARFIELD ON C.S. LEWIS

OWEN BARFIELD,
ED. G. B. TENNYSON
(THE BARFIELD PRESS)

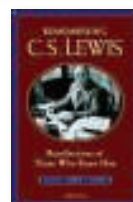
This book offers thought-provoking insights from the man Lewis described as the “wisest and best of my unofficial teachers.”



C.S. LEWIS A Biography

ROGER LANCELYN GREEN
AND WALTER HOOPER
ED. JAMES T. COMO
(HARPERCOLLINS ENTERTAINMENT)

Green and Hooper’s reliable account is the first “official” biography and is in many ways the best, especially now that it has been updated.



REMEMBERING C.S. LEWIS

Recollections of Those Who Knew Him

ED. JAMES T. COMO
(IGNATIUS PRESS)

This collection—which contains 24 snapshots of Lewis from friends, colleagues, and students—is full of color, humor, and human interest.



THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO C.S. LEWIS

EDS. ROBERT MACSWAIN
AND MICHAEL WARD
(CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS)

The Cambridge Companion compiles 21 scholarly but accessible discussions of Lewis’s works by theology and literature professors from the United Kingdom and North America.

Tanakh [Hebrew Bible], there is no excellent living apart from God's way for Israel that is to become the way for all people," writes Charry. The joy of being Israel portends the joy of being Christ's church. And when the psalmist describes the woes of the wicked, he writes evangelistically: "The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away," is a way of saying, "Look at the joy you are missing" (Ps. 112). A similar intent drives Proverbs, which assumes each person chooses to act wisely or foolishly, and thus happily or unhappily.

The asherist themes in the Older Testament culminate in the Younger Testament, especially in John's gospel, which recounts how Joy himself came to dwell among us. At one time, loving God and thus living the good life was about keeping Torah. Now, John the Evangelist says, loving God and thus living the good life is about obeying his Son. "Eternal life" is the distinctly Johannine phrase that describes this new way of living for and with God. Charry writes passionately:

Abiding by divine commands is the wisdom of God for the Tanakh; in John's Gospel it becomes loving intimacy with God. Eternal life with God is to abide in Jesus' wise guidance. By submitting to it, we experience the wisdom that strengthens, empowers, and liberates the soul for a happy life.

This summer I finally read *The Cost of Discipleship*. I saw instantly why Bonhoeffer's call to radical obedience is a classic, and would recommend it to any Christian today, who inevitably is dealing with cheap grace in their circles. Yet I would suggest they read *God and the Art of Happiness* alongside it. Bonhoeffer's vision of the Sermon on the Mount seemed to me to lack the joy—the "blessed is he"-ness—of following Jesus. If I understand Jesus' words in John 10:10, abundant life is offered to us now, as we follow him to his Father's house. Of course Bonhoeffer is right, the trek will cost us everything, including ourselves. But as Charry's invaluable work reminds us, it will also proffer us everything worth having. ☩

Katelyn Beaty is *Christianity Today's* associate editor.

Christ Is Enough

Why this simple reminder is necessary right now.

By Christopher Benson

Just when many of us are buckling under the contemporary regimen for getting closer to God, Phillip Cary compassionately unties the "heavy burdens, hard to bear" (Matt. 23:4, ESV). Addressed to shepherds and their flocks, **Good News for Anxious Christians** (Brazos) ★★★★★ features the admonishing, teaching, and comforting voice of a Christ-haunted philosophy professor at Eastern University. Its timely message is timeless: Servants of Christ grow through repetition of the gospel (which turns the heart outward), not through experimentation with techniques (which turns the heart inward).

Addicted to novelty, American evangelicals are seduced to forget the wisdom of an Israelite king: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9). The author's target—"new evangelical theology"—is only a reincarnation of 19th century liberal theology, spearheaded by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Such liberalism insisted that the essence of piety is not knowing or doing but feeling an absolute dependence on God. "The molten outpourings of the inner fire," Schleiermacher claimed, give rise to Christian doctrine and ritual. When evangelicals rank their relationship with God above what God did, does, and will do in Jesus Christ, they make better German Romantics than biblical disciples. Consequently, Cary says, they're ushering in a "post-Christian future" in which the person of Christ becomes increasingly impersonal and the Christian experience becomes increasingly unchristian.

His quiver contains ten arrows, one for each of the practical things that we don't have to do because they're not in the Bible, such as: hearing God's voice in our heart, believing our intuitions are the Holy Spirit, letting God take control, and finding God's will for our life. Driven by "consumerist spirituality," churches use these techniques to expand their market share

and ensure brand loyalty. They "succeed" by keeping us perpetually twitchy: guilty when unpracticed, disappointed when practiced. They actually fail by leaving us alone with ourselves, where we're vulnerable to self-deception, moral evasion, and spiritual woolgathering.

Because "experience is formed from the outside in," the goal of the book is to get nail-biting, brow-wrinkled, and sleep-deprived Christians outside of themselves to hear: "The good news of the gospel is that God has already decided to do something about our lives—whether we let him or not, whether we do anything about it or not, whether we believe it or not." God is italicized here to emphasize that our transformation is always divinely wrought, not humanly contrived. That's why Martin Luther prayed, "I will remain with thee of whom I can receive but to whom I may not give." Cary submits that the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) offers a powerful corrective to the strangely Catholicized and psychologized evangelicalism that oppresses us.

How do we follow the commandment to not be anxious about anything (Phil. 4:6)? The gospel, Cary argues, gives us permission to ignore anxiety-producing techniques because Christ is enough, period. Finding ourselves in Christ, as opposed to finding Christ in ourselves, means we're equipped—through the flesh of Christ, the Word of God, and the life of the church—to persevere in "the trial by existence," invoking the title of Robert Frost's poem. Instead of "bearing it crushed

and mystified," as the poet says in the final line, we can bear any vicissitude with the love, obedience, wisdom, virtue, and beauty of our Savior. ☩

Christopher Benson is a writer in Denver, Colorado. His work has appeared in *The Weekly Standard*, *Books @ Culture*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Image*, and *The City*. He blogs at Bensonian.org.

