

Engage360, Ep 28 | Part 3: Part 3: Theological Approaches to Suffering and Happiness

Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey, welcome back to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. This is Don Payne, your host. We are really grateful that you've joined us. This week is the third installment in our brief series on suffering and happiness. If you haven't yet heard the first two interviews with K.J. Ramsey and Dr. Doug Groothuis, I encourage you to take in those conversations. They're still on our website. Those will be good backdrop for this week's conversation. While nobody wants to suffer and everyone wants to be happy, Christianity exposes the complexity and the deeper significance of both suffering and happiness. Suffering turns out to be instrumental in showing us how we depend on God for our lives and everything in our lives. Happiness turns out to be sometimes overrated and even elusive when it's elevated to its own godlike status and when it's linked exclusively to circumstance or to certain emotional states.

But then at times we as Christians can get even those thicker layers of meaning tangled when we idolize suffering, when we wallow in brokenness when we romanticize brokenness and when maybe we feel ambivalent about happiness. So our first two interviews were focused primarily on suffering, but I hope you heard in each conversation or will hear if you haven't heard them yet. Something of how suffering and happiness inform each other. And what we learn in suffering teaches us something about the nature of true deep happiness. It sets us up for the possibility of that happiness. So this week we turn our attention to the subject of happiness and want to look into it more deeply through some biblical lenses, theological lenses, even honest experiential lenses. Now our guest this week is Dr. Knut Heim from our Old Testament faculty. Welcome Knut.

Dr. Knut Heim: It's great to be here. Thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: Knut seems to me to be one of the happiest people I know now that may not be saying very much for seminary professors because nobody first thinks of seminary professors when they think of happy people. But you'll see shortly why he is our guest this week. So Dr. Knut Heim, and I have to say that his first name is pronounced Knut not Newt, is that correct?

Dr. Don Payne: That is correct. Thank you Don.

Dr. Knut Heim: Americans will routinely drop the K on names like yours because many of us were conditioned by Newt Rockne, the famous early 1900s, Notre Dame football player and coach, but it's Knut. And Knut is originally from Germany.

Now, completed his PhD at the University of Liverpool, England and taught in the UK for, I think around 20 years.

Dr. Knut Heim:

That is correct. Yes.

Dr. Don Payne:

Before joining our faculty in 2016. He's an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of the United Kingdom and specializes in the poetic and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Knut's wife, Hannah is Bishop of the Methodist Church in her home country, The Gambia. And I've really enjoyed developing a friendship with Knut over these last three years and wanted to have him on this episode of the podcast for a couple of reasons. First, he's involved in something called the Happiness Project. I think I have that correct. And we're going to explore that in a little bit. And also he just published a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, with IVP Academic. So before we launch into the conversation, Knut why don't you fill in a few of the blanks on your personal story, your background for us.

Dr. Knut Heim:

Okay. Well, I guess the first thing to say about myself is that I'm most famous really for my wife who is the presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in The Gambia in West Africa. She is a wonderful woman and one of the reasons why, as you rightly say, I am a very happy person enjoying life and just so grateful to be alive right now, right here. Perhaps my fascination with happiness and that is why we're having this conversation today began in seminary more than 30 years ago now, when I took a course on the book of Ecclesiastes, which actually changed my life and my theology. Because until then I wanted to be an evangelist or a missionary or an apologist. But studying the book of Ecclesiastes at seminary, changed all of that really through encountering in the book a way to deal with suffering, and yet being open and proactive about enjoying life to the full and finding happiness. Not just when things are going well, but in the ordinary things of life. I hope that's kind of a helpful opener for our conversation.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yeah, it really is. When you were first describing what you originally wanted to be I had this polarity set up in my mind where you wanted to be a pastor or an evangelist, but then you decided you could be happy instead. That's where my mind went.

Dr. Knut Heim:

That's great. I don't think I was that sophisticated back then in those years. But what happened really is I had entered seminary thinking I knew most all of what needs to be known about God. And all I needed was a paper to show that I could be a Pastor or a missionary, or an evangelist. And I thought, I knew most of the answers to most of the important questions. But living life as a lot of people.

Dr. Don Payne:

You're in a long line of people with that assumption.

Dr. Knut Heim: Unfortunately, because it's of course unrealistic and unhelpful when people have those attitudes. And the book of Ecclesiastics really helped me to see that. By the time I had studied the book cover to cover at seminary level as a student, I realized I suddenly now had more questions than I had ever before. But what I believed and how I follow Jesus was much more authentic and realistic and down to earth. And I felt, even though I had a lot more questions, I actually had a lot more to say and to share about my faith with others, helping them to cope with the realities of life. Because even through the book, I found myself ways of living a Christian life that was more real, more appropriate to the oddities and difficulties and challenges and also opportunities of life.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't know if this what I'm going to describe is as true in other parts of, with Christians in other parts of the world as it is here in the US, but I find that quite a number of American Christians seem somewhat ambivalent about happiness. Now, certainly they want to be happy, we all, as I said in the intro, we all want to be happy. But I, I hear certain phrases repeated over and over pitting happiness against holiness, for example. Or trying not to become too emotionally invested in being happy and all of that has puzzled me over many years making me wonder whether we have a thinned out theology of happiness and need to rebuild that. My question will sound maybe rhetorical here, but is it true? Would you agree that happiness is maybe misunderstood or underrated in some Christian communities? Is it, do you recognize that at all from your experience?

Dr. Knut Heim: I do recognize that. And I think that is not only true in the United States, but also across the world, especially in Western countries like Germany and other parts of Europe. I think there's a difference to other parts of the world, let's say in Africa and in Asia. People have different attitudes and different cultural things that they bring to the question of happiness. But in the West by and large, it seems to me that Christians to a large degree have given up on happiness. And we see this, for example, in one or two ways in which Christians talk about it. Often I have heard many sermons about this and I've read books about it where pastors and Christian teachers make a difference, for example, between happiness, which is supposed to be superficial and not worth a Christians while, and joy.

And joy is suddenly a construct that is somehow something good and something helpful and something nice but almost in the midst and because of suffering. But as happiness is portrayed as something that is superficial and is for people who are not spiritual, for people who are not Christians. And only operates at the level of consumption and of having things of owning things, of buying things, of holding onto things. And that seems to me to be an unrealistic and unhelpful dichotomy. I believe there is in the Christian Bible, and in the Christian tradition, a genuine theology of happiness that is deep, that is realistic, that is able to cope with suffering, but does not need suffering to somehow justify feeling good about oneself.

Dr. Don Payne: Almost as if we have to balance the scales out by suffering enough that we can legitimate feeling good from time to time.

Dr. Knut Heim: Yeah, I think that's right. And I think that's behind this language of joy as opposed to happiness. I want to reject that in my own work. I reject it my own personal life and I reject it in my academic writing because I think happiness is something that is real and that is intended for us as human beings from God. Of course we are living in a world that is partially broken, that is influenced and sadly hampered by sin. And sin in many dimensions, the sinfulness in our own personal lives, but also the sinfulness of other people around us. And the brokenness of a world where, for example, our bodies regularly suffer from accidents or from illnesses of genetic defects that help us, that kind of stop us from fully exercising everything that our bodies normally ought to be able to do. All these things create suffering at a regular basis around us. But in the midst of this, not because of it, but in the midst of it, we can be genuinely happy because the God who creates it, this world and placed us into it has overcome the causes of suffering in and through the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection, the Ascension, and the ongoing reign of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. Who showed us how to live, who as the Trinitarian God, father, son and Holy Spirit has inspired the Bible, this amazing book of wisdom rich and over hundreds of years to help us live our lives well in response to God's will. And perfect will for us as human beings. That enables us to find genuine happiness here in this world right here, right now.

Dr. Don Payne: I suppose that maybe a number of the stereotypical reactions that sound very pious, but their reactions against the language of happiness on the part of Christians - some of that comes from having seen people use happiness as a way of rationalizing a decision that they should not make. For example people who are, who are stuck in a really difficult marriage and want to abandon the marriage and will rationalize that by saying, but God wants me to be happy, and I found somebody else I can be happy with. And you know, the church understandably, hears that sort of talk and you know, reacts against that, when the happiness card is played to validate or rationalize immoral decisions in some cases. When we hear things like that, we get very disturbed and very uncertain what to do with the theology of happiness. And so it's easy then to kind of deflect to this category of joy, which of course is a very biblical category, but to polarize those or to distinguish between them as if they're two very different things. So let me pose a question to you. Do you think, and again, this was probably rhetorical, but do you think God intends us to be happy? Did God make us to be happy?

Dr. Knut Heim: Yes. I wholeheartedly believe that is the case.

Dr. Don Payne: Explain the sense in which you mean that.

Dr. Knut Heim: What I want to share with you and with our listeners is that God is a good God who created a perfect world, a sinless world, and us in his image in order to experience the fullness of life in relationship with God himself. And it is built

into the very fabric of who we are to yearn for happiness, to miss it when it is not there, and to stretch out towards it. The great church father son's Augustine speaks about the fact that we can be genuinely happy but only genuinely happy if we know God personally, and have a deep relationship with God. So I believe God is to begin with a happy God who wants to have a relationship with his most treasured creatures and wants us to be happy too. Now that is of course the ideal. That's what was originally intended and there is now a brokenness in this world. There's a brokenness in us. There are circumstances that influence our situations that make it sometimes difficult to be happy, but God has not left us alone in this. But God, the Trinity got the father who created us and who set up the world as it is now, Jesus who lived our lives as we ought to live them for us as an example to follow. And the Holy Spirit that God and the Father and God, the son sent into our lives to be our comforter, our advocate, our guide. This Holy Spirit is actively at work in us today to help us to live our lives well.

Dr. Don Payne: Maybe we should not make a distinction between joy and happiness. Correct? Because that distinction has been overdeveloped, overcooked.

Dr. Knut Heim: Yeah. I definitely want to say that I kind of born to get rid of that distinction and talk about happiness as something that is genuinely obtainable, but only through a deep theological understanding of how we can live our lives well, so that happiness can be experienced.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So for the many who do suffer some chronically, some perpetually, and for those who perhaps temperamentally find happiness to be very elusive. What is this happiness actually look like experientially in a broken world?

Dr. Knut Heim: I think this may be where that language of joy is actually helpful, but I think only when you bring up examples as the ones you have just brought up, which are actually quite extreme. So if you have someone who is suffering from chronic pain, and I know what we're talking about here because I have had a period in my life, that actually was about three years long where I suffered chronically from a variety of things, both physical illnesses, but also psychological situations and circumstances that made me deeply, deeply unhappy. Now I think in those kinds of situations we can still have a genuine relationship with God and our lives can still be meaningful, but it is not very easy to say or even to feel, Hey, in this situation of real suffering, I am happy. I think we must not fall into the trap of thinking that happiness is necessarily something that we deserve or that God owes us or that life owes us or that other people owe us. So, for example, in the situation you described a little bit earlier of a difficult marriage. Well, a difficult marriage isn't supposed to be happy. There need to be situations and sets of behaviors changes of attitudes towards one another.

A change of lifestyle, of values of the way one behaves towards the other and the other towards that one, in order to improve the marriage, then happiness can reenter that relationship. But that can only come through wisdom and sometimes hard work. And it may include the situation where one or both marriage partners have to genuinely repent of mistakes of erroneous behavior,

maybe even patterns of behavior over time that have been unhelpful. So happiness isn't something that life owes us. Happiness is not even something that our marriage partner owes us. And if our marriage partner is not able to make us happy, the likelihood is that we are not making them happy either. So I think what the word of God teaches us and what a theology of happiness, and what genuine Christian wisdom teaches us is, if my marriage partner is not making me happy, it's probably because I am not making him or her happy in the first place. So there needs to be a deeper, wise, faithful reaching out towards the other, through prayer, through a new renewed and deepening relationship with God that reinvigorates that marriage.

Dr. Don Payne: So what you're talking about actually is sort of a set of disciplines and a groundwork, a foundation work that makes us the kind of people who can be genuinely happy in the sense that God made us to be, as opposed to a more or more superficial happiness that is based on, and I love what you just described, which is very much an entitlement. That I'm entitled to happiness. I may be created for happiness, but that's not exactly the same thing. It sounds to me like as the world or God owing it to me, we all have to have to discipline ourselves to, you know, create the kinds of conditions to be the kind of people who can be happy people, who can live in happy circumstance. Is that fair?

Dr. Knut Heim: Yeah, that's right. Yup. Yup. And sometimes we may have to make choices and make decisions that make some aspects of our lives more difficult than before. But those sacrifices and those decisions actually foster happiness. So something you mentioned earlier, an example where someone says, Oh, I'm getting divorced or I'm seeking a divorce because my wife or my husband is not making me happy anymore, is exactly and completely the wrong approach to finding happiness because it is that superficial idea. Somehow it's circumstances that make us happy rather than it is a relationship with God that informs our lifestyles, our decisions, our values and our sets of behaviors that make us happy. And that really leads me to something I'm so glad that in our conversation now we are really getting there.

And that is the Bible is full of texts. For example, the so-called beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus lists eight, not circumstances, but eight values or situations that can make Christians genuinely happy, happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Happy are those who are merciful and so on. Now, the virtues that Jesus is talking about, are sets of values, behaviors priorities in our lives that come from a genuine wisdom and a theology of happiness that is not superficial, that doesn't come natural. That is but is however deeply informed through a life of prayer, a willingness to learn, a willingness to sacrifice in order to obtain things that are more important, an openness towards the blessings of God in our lives where we are not earning something, we are not manipulating something, but we are receiving something from a good God who loves us and wants us to be happy.

Dr. Don Payne: I love that word – receiving – that to me is key. When we come to realize that, that all of life is a gift and that we live life with open hands, the hands of a

receptor, a receiver, that expands dramatically our capacities for happiness. And without that attitude, that department of a receiver who treats all of life is a gift. We're always in entitlement mode and the things that you would think would make us happy never do make us happy cause we don't have the right capacity for happiness as a receiver.

Dr. Knut Heim: Yeah. I think that is part of our brokenness. As human beings, what we naturally do is we have a clenched fist holding onto things, grabbing things, containing them and holding them for ourselves, thinking that is what makes us happy. Yet Jesus counterintuitively for a non-spiritual human being says giving is more blessed than receiving. And this is one of those wonderful spiritual paradoxes that can make our lives so much more rich as we give to others. We open our hands and receive even more in turn, as opposed to grabbing happiness, pursuing happiness in a selfish way. It's in giving that we receive, in helping others that we experience joy and happiness in the here and now.

Dr. Don Payne: I think in discipleship programs, happiness or the cultivation of the right capacity for happiness ought to be on the agenda of spiritual disciplines and discipleship.

Dr. Knut Heim: Yes, and Amen. Praise the Lord I say here. Exactly. Yeah, and I think to be honest, we need a little bit of a revolution where we genuinely trust God, that he does want us to be happy and that he can make us happy as in when we live our lives for God and for others rather than trying to live them for ourselves. And God is a kind of helpful afterthought or other people are helpful afterthought. If we put others first, God will put us into a place of happiness.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I love the way you said that. Okay. You have just recently published a book, a commentary on Ecclesiastes, which we may have to schedule another episode to talk about that commentary yet at some length. But you have a chapter in that book on a theology of happiness. So how did you get interested in this from an academic perspective?

Dr. Knut Heim: Yeah, it's a fascinating thing. You know, we talked early in our conversation about the fact that I took a course as a 20 something year old on the book of Ecclesiastes, and that has gone with me for the next 30 years or so of my life. And one of the things I discovered in the book of Ecclesiastes is it is so realistic about life. It tells it as it is. And so there's this beautiful poetic meditation. There's a time for everything under heaven, a time for dancing, a time for weeping, a time for giving birth, a time for dying, a time for peace, a time for war. And what does, what that suggests is that life is not meant to be easy. And that's actually extremely helpful, especially in societies of the modern West. Whether that's Western Europe or North America where people seem to have all the financial resources that ought to make life easy to live and we intuitively think happy to live. Yet even those of us who live financially abundant lives often encounter circumstances that make us deeply unhappy. And this really regularly catches us out because we don't expect it. We have expectations of life that are unrealistic and superficial and when circumstances arise that are a little bit more challenging or difficult, we have no capacities. We have no sets of

rules or behavior. We have no intuitive wisdom on how to respond to it. And so we find ourselves frustrated by circumstances, blaming the circumstances for our unhappiness, and missing opportunities that are actually there that I believe the book of Ecclesiastes gives us.

Especially towards the end of the book where the author is talking quite genuinely for almost an entire chapter about what I have described as a theology of happiness. And it begins with a realistic outlook on life. Life is not meant to be easy, so we shouldn't be disappointed and frustrated when things are difficult. But as in when God, who is the giver of good gifts in the Bible, when this God gives us circumstances and situations, events in our lives, a deepening relationship with God himself or a deep friendship and a deep love in our marriage that we truly appreciate that as something extra ordinary and wonderful and beautiful, and don't take it for granted but celebrate it. And this really brings me to something that got me so excited in my academic work and in the work I want to do over the next few years in writing about a theology of happiness. And that is in the last 20 years or so. The academic study of emotions has really come into its own and is now a well established academic discipline at modern universities. That includes also the study of our topic for today, the study of happiness.

So much so that we now actually have professors and chairs and departments, at least at some universities that have to do with happiness. People actually speak of the science of happiness. And over the last 15 years in particular, people have done different kinds of studies. To be honest, a lot of these studies of course are a little bit reductionist, is a little bit simplistic, in order to make it measurable from a scientific perspective. So some of these are a little bit simplistic and reductionist, but they have studied certain kinds of behaviors and attitudes that tend to make people more happy than others. And fascinatingly and astonishingly for me and excitingly, what I have found as I have studied this whole literature and the various experiences that have been conducted, what I find is that almost all of the behaviors that the modern science of happiness has identified as being conducive to happiness of things that have forever been promoted in the Bible. And have forever been taught in Christian theology for hundreds and now thousands of years. The sad thing I believe is that even so many Christians today are not as happy as they could be because we are not taking our own traditions, our own values, our own virtues that we already have, seriously enough. Too many Christians have as their main goal in life, the pursuit of happiness. And if God fits in with it then well and good, rather than realizing that it is putting God first in our lives that makes us and has the capacity to make us more happy than anything else in the world. And I'll give you just one example on this, and this is again, is a study that has been conducted and been written a lot about is that people tend to be happier when they are thankful. So there are some studies at the end of, they study how people behave and people who regularly say thank you to things. So you know, a control group will be set up one set of people will be told every day in the evening I spend 15 minutes thinking about things that you are happy for, grateful for, and mention them and be thankful. And thank somebody for

something good that has happened in your life. And then another group is not told to do that.

But both groups are then asked at the end of the day, how do you feel? And surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly, the people who've been encouraged to be grateful, report immensely more sense of happiness than the other group. Now, thankfulness is one of the great and wonderful capacities and sets of behaviors that are plastered almost over every page in the Holy scripture, in the Bible. That we should be thankful to God for the good things in our lives. And if we do that because we have realistic expectations of life, we don't take when things go well for granted, but we genuinely see it as something special, as something to be grateful for, to be celebrated, to be savored, to be enjoyed, and to be then given back to God in gratitude and in love towards him for his generosity towards us, has the capacity to revolutionize our lives and make us so much more happy than most of us generally tend to be.

Dr. Don Payne: Here, here. I think shockwaves of this or the, the effects of this conversation should cascade through the entire church. We need a revival of genuine theologically rooted happiness and that is going to come. I would be convinced from a revival of gratitude, just a posture of gratitude and of seeing life and all of the gifts of God right alongside suffering and brokenness as outpouring of the, just the graciousness as the French would say the largesse, the bounty of God's heart. What a great note to end on. Knut Heim, thank you. Thanks for being our guest on the Engage360.

Dr. Knut Heim: It's been such a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, this, this makes me very happy. It does. And on that note, let me put in a once again, a plug for Dr. Heim's recent commentary on Ecclesiastes. It was published just this year by IVP Academic. You can find it with all the major booksellers and I'd encourage you to get a copy and we may schedule another conversation to talk more about that book and your interpretive approach to Ecclesiastes.

Dr. Knut Heim: I look forward to that.

Dr. Don Payne: I hope we can do that. Thank you for joining us and we hope that you will communicate with us. Email us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. Check our website for resources. We'd love to be in touch with you and have you be in touch with us. On behalf of the entire Denver Seminary community, we're grateful for you. I'm Don Payne, your host, and we hope to be able to speak to you again next week. Take care.