
That Your Joy May Be Full

A Theology of Happiness

Scott R. Swain*

The Eudaimonia Machine is a work environment designed for what Cal Newport calls “deep work,” the state of undistracted, focused attention in which human beings are able to operate to the full extent of their creative capacities.¹ This work environment “takes its name from the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (a state in which you’re achieving your full human potential).”² Though the Eudaimonia Machine exists only in the mind of its architect, David Dewane, not yet in reality, it rests upon a valid insight. There is a relationship between our environment and our well-being. There are both objective and subjective dimensions to human flourishing, *eudaimonia*.

The Eudaimonia Machine also reveals that there are competing conceptions of human flourishing. While the Eudaimonia Machine suggests that human flourishing or happiness consists in productivity, others have argued happiness consists in the possession of external goods such as wealth, honor, and fame, or that it consists in the possession of internal goods such as physical health or virtue.³ As Aristotle observed, the pursuit of happiness is unavoidable, but its character is not undisputed.

The phenomenon of happiness is disputed because our perception of happiness is both limited (due to our finitude) and liable to distortion (due to our

* Scott R. Swain is President and James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. He and his wife, Leigh, have four children.

1 Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central, 2016), 95.

2 Newport, *Deep Work*, 95.

3 Thomas Aquinas surveys these various options, and finds each of them wanting, in *Summa theologiae*, I-II.2.1–8 (hereafter *ST*).

fallenness). We disagree about *whether* happiness exists—is it truly achievable or is it just a mirage? We disagree about *what* happiness is—does it lie in riches, wisdom, power, pleasure, or fame? And we disagree about *how* happiness may be achieved—should we pursue the American Dream or should we audition for *American Idol*?

WHAT IS TRUE HAPPINESS?

Christian theology enters the fray surrounding human flourishing and seeks to expound what God has disclosed about this topic in his word. In response to the question of *whether* happiness exists, Christian theology confesses that happiness exists, first, in “the happy God” (1 Tim. 1:11)⁴ and, second, in creatures designed and destined for happiness in communion with the happy God (Ps. 144:15). In response to the question regarding *what* happiness is, Christian theology confesses that happiness consists in possessing, knowing, and enjoying the supreme and unsurpassable good, God himself, the blessed Trinity. “I have no good apart from you,” the psalmist declares (Ps. 16:2). “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). And in response to the question of *how* happiness may be achieved, Christian theology confesses that divine happiness communicates itself to us, freely and abundantly, through the Mediator of happiness, Jesus Christ our Lord. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11; 17:13, 24–26).

In Jesus Christ, eternal, unchanging, and unsurpassable beatitude⁵ shines upon us and welcomes us into its all-satisfying presence. For now we enjoy a

4 Throughout I cite the ESV, albeit with frequent modification.

5 A few comments on terminology are in order. First, “beatitude,” as I use it in this article (along with terms such as “happiness,” “felicity,” “blessedness,” etc.) refers to the state of being in which a person possesses goods (both objective and subjective) that are necessary for that person’s wholeness, fulfillment, and satisfaction. Second, the Bible primarily uses two terms, $\bar{\iota}\psi\eta\varsigma$ and μακάριος, along with a host of other terms, descriptions, images, etc., to refer to “beatitude” as I define it here. The ESV commonly translates both terms as “blessed” (e.g., Ps. 1:1; Matt. 5:3). Though this is a perfectly suitable translation, being “blessed” can connote “being the object of God’s

taste of this happiness on the pilgrim path of faith and repentance. One day we will drink fully and deeply from the infinite ocean of beatitude when we behold the triune God in the unmediated splendor of his personal presence, “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 22:1–5). This is our “happy hope” (Titus 2:13): that the God who dwells in unapproachable light and unlimited delight will also dwell with us (Isa. 57:15–19; 1 Tim. 6:16), that God will be our happy inheritance, our happy habitation (Ps. 16:5–6), and that we will flourish in his presence to his eternal glory (Ps. 1:3; Isa. 33:24; 61:3).

What follows is an account of happiness from a theological perspective.⁶ We will address the topic of happiness by considering various elements within the order of beatitude—that order of happiness that begins in and with God, that freely flows from God in the creation, redemption, and consummation of creatures, and that returns to and rests in God.

HAPPINESS BEGINS IN GOD

A Christian account of happiness begins with the blessed Trinity, the primary form of happiness in the universe and the principle from and to which all other forms of happiness flow. As God is the supreme good (Mark 10:18), to be extolled above all by all at all times in all places (Ps. 145:1–3, 21), so also is he the supreme beatitude, “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15).

Along with divine perfection and divine glory, divine beatitude is a summative attribute. A summative attribute is not simply one attribute among others,

blessing,” which is a slightly different concept than “being in a state of beatitude or well-being.” The two concepts, of course, are related, but they are represented by different terms in both Hebrew and Greek that carry slightly different significance. Third, in contemporary usage, “happiness” often refers merely to a person’s subjective state of well-being. In this article, I use the term with fuller reference, referring to both objective and subjective aspects of beatitude. This is essential because, according to the Bible, one can be in a state of beatitude even while experiencing sorrow (Matt. 5:4).

6 I have attempted to provide a much shorter account of these matters here: <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2016/01/on-happiness-a-theological-out.php>.

but instead an attribute that characterizes all of God's attributes. God's wisdom, goodness, and power are *perfect* wisdom, *perfect* goodness, and *perfect* power. God's wisdom, goodness, and power are, furthermore, *glorious and beautiful*. God's wisdom, goodness, and power are therefore objects of God's supreme *beatitude, delight, and satisfaction*. Divine *perfection* refers to the fullness of God's being, the infinite riches of his wisdom, goodness, and power (Rom. 11:33; Eph. 2:4, 7; 3:8, 18–20). Divine *glory* refers to the beauty of God's being, the utter clarity and intelligibility of God's radiant life (Heb. 1:3; 1 John 1:5). Divine *beatitude*, in turn, presupposes both divine perfection and divine glory.⁷ Divine beatitude refers to the satisfaction of God as he reposes in, rests in, and rejoices in the beauty of his perfect being. The blessed Trinity “dwells” in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:15–16). The Father rests in his radiant Son in the Spirit (Matt. 3:16–17) and, by the Spirit, the Son rejoices in the glory of the Father (Luke 10:21). Divine beatitude is “the happy land of the Trinity,”⁸ where, suffering no lack, the blessed Trinity reposes in the fullness of his luminous life.

God's beatitude is simple.⁹ Nothing “makes” God happy. God does not “have” happiness. “God is happiness by his essence.”¹⁰ He is happy because he is who he is (Ex. 3:14). God's beatitude is eternal. “The glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11) is the glory of “the King of the ages” (1 Tim. 1:17), the glory of one who lacks beginning and end. God's beatitude is immutable. Nothing can increase God's happiness, and nothing can take it away (Job 22:2–3; 35:6–7; 41:11;

7 To say that divine beatitude “presupposes” divine perfection and divine glory is to say something about the way we come to understand God's attributes. We can only understand what divine beatitude involves by understanding first what divine perfection and divine glory involve.

8 This happy turn of phrase comes from Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), chap. 2.

9 The doctrine of divine simplicity teaches, negatively, that God is not composed of parts upon which he might depend to be who and what he is. It teaches, positively, that God is identical with his attributes. The doctrine of divine simplicity rests upon biblical teaching that God is who he is (Ex. 3:14): the self-existent one, whose being and attributes do not depend upon anything (John 5:26), and the self-same one, whose being is identical with his attributes (1 John 1:5).

10 Aquinas, *ST*, I-II.3.1.

Acts 17:25; Rom. 11:35; James 1:17). God's beatitude is impassible. Because God is perfect, he rests content in himself as his own final end. He desires no further completion, no further fulfillment from anything outside of himself. God lacks all desire, reposing in himself in infinitely realized delight. God's impassible happiness is fully actualized happiness.¹¹ For this reason, God's will toward anything outside of himself is not an expression of desire but of pure benevolence.¹² God wills and affirms the existence of creatures, without grudging, without envy (James 1:5).

Consequently, while divine beatitude is the supreme form of beatitude, it is not the exclusive form of beatitude. God's blessedness is a communicative attribute—that is, an attribute that he shares with creatures. As the supreme good, God is also the supreme source of creaturely goods: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). And each creaturely good carries with it a distinct form of happiness for creatures capable of happiness. Some creaturely goods are worthy of our love: we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). Other creaturely goods are not worthy of our love but are to be received and shared with our neighbors for our mutual enjoyment: wine gladdens the heart of man, oil makes his face shine, and bread strengthens his heart (Ps. 104:15). All creaturely goods are limited goods, and therefore sources of limited satisfaction, pleasure, and felicity. But all creaturely

11 Maximus the Confessor, “*Ambiguum 7: On the Beginning and End of Rational Creatures*,” in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 45–74.

12 “Desire,” as I use the term here, refers to something a bit more specific than “wanting something.” It refers to “wanting some good that one lacks.” Its terminological correlate is “delight,” which refers to “wanting some good that one possesses.” “Desire” longs for an unpossessed good, while “delight” relishes in a possessed good. In the sense of the term as I am using it here, therefore, God does not “desire” his creatures for the very simple reason that God's will with respect to creatures does not arise from a lack that the possession of creatures might fulfill. For further discussion of these dynamics, see Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), chap. 7.

goods are true goods, and therefore sources of true satisfaction, pleasure, and felicity.

Christian teaching on happiness thus rules out disordered hedonism, which treats finite goods, objects of finite happiness, as if they were infinite goods, objects of infinite happiness (Matt. 6:31–33). Christian teaching on happiness also rules out false asceticism, which devalues finite goods, objects of finite happiness (1 Tim. 4:1–5). All creaturely goods, both material and social, are to be received “with thanksgiving” to the happy God who makes us happy through them (1 Tim. 4:4). Even in their finitude, they point to the one who is the transcendent good and the object of transcendent delight: our true food, our true drink, our true husband (Ps. 45; John 3:29; 6:35, 55). The blessed Trinity is thus the source and end of all creaturely goods, all objects of creaturely happiness within the order of beatitude.

GOD’S HAPPINESS FOR HIS CREATURES

In the work of creation, the blessed Trinity was pleased to produce manifold creatures, which exhibit manifold forms of goodness and which elicit manifold forms of satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness. Among God’s manifold creatures, God designed and destined certain creatures to be beneficiaries of both temporal and eternal beatitude. God made human beings, along with the angels, for a supreme and unsurpassable good that lies outside of themselves in communion with the blessed Trinity: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Ps. 73:25). Though God placed a natural appetite for eternity in the heart of human beings, natural revelation and natural reason are not sufficient to lead human beings to the eternal happiness that alone can satisfy our natural desire (Eccles. 3:11) because eternal happiness transcends nature (Job 28). In his condescending goodness and by means of his word, God was pleased therefore to reveal to human beings both the object of eternal happiness, the blessed Trinity (Ps. 2), as well as the path that leads to eternal fellowship

with him (Gen. 2:9, 16–17; Psalm 1; Mark 10:17).¹³ “You make known to me the path of life” (Ps. 16:11).

Created for eternal happiness in communion with God, man has nevertheless pierced himself through with many sorrows (Ps. 16:4; 1 Tim. 6:10) and plunged the entire creation into a state of corruption, pain, and futility (Rom. 8:20–22) by transgressing the order of beatitude (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12–21). He has refused to make the knowledge of the blessed Trinity his supreme boast and, instead, has made his boast in creatures (Jer. 9:23; Rom. 1:21–23, 25): “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:12–13). In forsaking the blessed Trinity, man has enslaved himself, along with his various appetites (2 Pet. 2:12; 1 John 2:16), to the various creatures he was made to rule. He chases after food and clothing (Matt. 6:31–32), after the honor of man (John 5:44), and after the riches that (he believes) alone can afford them all (Matt. 6:24). And he engages in mortal combat with anyone who would impede the blind march of his pleasures and ambitions (James 4:1–3).

In all his senseless pursuits, he considers himself wise (Prov. 26:12–16; Rom. 1:22) but the path he has chosen “is the path of those who have foolish confidence” (Ps. 49:13). The temporary happiness he gains for himself is deceptive: “For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light” (Ps. 49:18–19). His path does not lead to the eternal happiness appointed for human beings by God but to a beastly ruin: “Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish” (Ps. 49:20).

GOD’S HAPPINESS TO SHOW MERCY

Due to their rebellion against God, human beings are objects of the divine wrath that “is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of

13 Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.1.

men” (Rom. 1:18; see also Eph. 2:3). But the God who is “full of wrath” (Ps. 78:21) is also “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4). The blessed and triune God is compassionate toward miserable sinners, determined to bring them out of the misery they have inherited from Adam into the happiness he has appointed for them in and through Jesus Christ. The saving mercy of God toward miserable sinners is the undivided operation of all three persons of the Trinity. As the three persons are one God, so they are agents of one merciful agency. However, in mercy’s threefold movement from its initiation through its accomplishment to its result, specific persons of the Trinity shine forth in specific ways.¹⁴ Accordingly, in the undivided operation of saving mercy, the love of God the Father shines forth distinctly in mercy’s initiation, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ shines forth distinctly in mercy’s accomplishment, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit shines forth distinctly in mercy’s result (2 Cor. 13:14). Out of the Father’s love, by the Son’s grace, and within the Spirit’s fellowship, the blessed Trinity makes miserable sinners blessed in him.

The mercy of the blessed Trinity toward miserable sinners begins in “the love of God” (2 Cor. 13:14): “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us. . .” (Eph. 2:4). Mercy’s fountain is the pure benevolence of God the Father toward undeserving “vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom. 9:23). The Father’s pure benevolence regards neither the good nor the bad (Rom. 9:11), neither human will nor human exertion (Rom. 9:16) in the objects of his mercy. He only regards his “purpose of election” (Rom. 9:11), his purpose of making his beloved Son the firstborn among many redeemed brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:28–29; Eph. 1:9–10), “that in everything he might be preeminent” (Col. 1:18). “Of him”—of the Father’s love—“you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts,

14 For further discussion of “the doctrine of appropriations,” see Scott R. Swain, “Divine Trinity,” in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 103–4. See also: <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/a-trinitarian-theology-of-salv.php>.

boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:30–31). The love of God thus initiates the mercy that secures our beatitude in Christ the King.

GOD’S HAPPINESS THROUGH HIS SON

The mercy of the blessed Trinity toward miserable sinners is accomplished by “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 13:14): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that being rich, he made himself poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Mercy is accomplished by the pure grace of God the Son in his mediatorial person and work. “*Being rich. . .*” The Son of God knows the riches of divine beatitude by nature and by messianic appointment. From before the foundation of the world, the eternal Son has basked in the pleasure of the Father’s face and shared in the fullness of the Father’s joy (Ps. 16:11; John 1:1; 17:24). From before the foundation of the world, the eternal Son has been “anointed with the oil of gladness beyond [his] companions” (Ps. 45:7), and he has been appointed to bring his people “with joy and gladness” into “the palace of the king” (Ps. 45:15). The Son of God is a happy Messiah, eternally rich in the happiness of God, appointed and anointed to make his people happy through marital union with him. In Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, all the secondary and derivative goods of creation find their primary form and supreme fulfillment. He is the light of the world (John 8:12), the bread of life (John 6:35), the bridegroom (John 3:29): our light, our life, our royal bridegroom, who brings poor vile sinners into his house of wine (Gen. 49:11–12).¹⁵

How does the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ bring these glad tidings to pass? “He *made himself poor*” (2 Cor. 8:9). Without ceasing to be the eternally rich God by nature, the Son of God willingly assumed our poor humanity into personal union with himself in the virgin’s womb. Rich and happy in himself, he was happy to own our poverty and misery: “God of God, Light of Light; Lo, he abhors not the virgin’s womb.”¹⁶ To what end? Not to gain happiness or riches for himself, but to communicate his happiness and riches to us (Mark 10:45): “so

15 The language of the last part of this sentence comes from the final verse of Anne Cousin’s hymn “The Sands of Time Are Sinking” (1857).

16 John Francis Wade, “O Come, All Ye Faithful” (1743).

that you through his poverty might become rich.” For our sakes, the incarnate Son of God obeyed the order of beatitude. He became the “happy man” of Psalm 1 who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, did not stand in the way of sinners, and did not sit in the seat of scoffers. He delighted in the law of the Lord, and he meditated upon it day and night. The Lord made known to him “the path of life,” and he traversed that path to its divinely appointed destination in God’s presence, where there is “fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11).

By the Lord’s appointment, however, traversing this path to the joy that was set before him required him to endure the cross for our sake (Heb. 12:2). Because our sin is the cause of our misery, our misery could only be removed when our sin had been replaced with his obedience and when our sin’s punishment had been executed upon his head. And so the incarnate Son of God became a “man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3). Though his contemporaries esteemed him a God-forsaken sinner (Isa. 53:4), “it was the will of the LORD to crush him” (Isa. 53:10), not because of his own sins but because of ours: “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 54:4); “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). As a consequence of his obedience and sin-bearing death on our behalf, we inherit peace and healing (Isa. 53:5), righteousness and riches (Isa. 53:10–12). Through his poverty, we are enriched.

The incarnate Son of God, who secured riches of mercy for us through his humiliation and poverty, bestows these riches upon us from his exalted place at the right hand of the Father as the head of his body, the church. In union with the incarnate, crucified, and exalted Son of God, we are reconciled to the order of beatitude. “The oil of gladness” (Ps. 45:7) with which he is anointed flows, by the Spirit, from the head to the body, filling it with the fullness of divine beatitude (Ps. 133:2). Filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 1:22–23), our pleasure in the once-slain, now-reigning Lamb is perfected in his praise (Eph. 5:18–22): “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12). “How good and pleasant it is” to

“dwell in unity” with the incarnate Son of God, the redeemer and head of his people (Ps. 133:1)!

GOD’S HAPPINESS BY HIS SPIRIT

The mercy of the blessed Trinity toward miserable sinners reaches its goal in “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14). As the loving purpose of God the Father is fulfilled in the self-giving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, so the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, having fulfilled the purpose of God the Father, abounds in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit through the agencies of the Word (Eph. 3:1–13), the sacraments (1 Cor. 10:16; Eph. 4:5), and prayer (Eph. 3:14–21). Having communicated to us the free gift of justification, the Spirit awakens us to the new order of beatitude inaugurated through Jesus’s death and resurrection and assures us of our eternal inheritance in God: “But when the goodness and kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5–7).

The Spirit enables us to possess and perceive the mercy purposed by the Father and purchased by the Son. The Spirit, who searches the depths of divine beatitude (1 Cor. 2:10–11), shows the depths of God’s mercy to us and bestows the depths of God’s mercy upon us: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). The mercy purposed by the Father and purchased by the Son is, furthermore, a mercy ordered to “fellowship,” the *mutual* possession and sharing of goods with God and neighbor. The Spirit enables us to see and receive the goods of heaven and earth, of this age and the age to come, as they really are: as gifts that radiate outward from the throne of the blessed and triune God. The Spirit then enables us to return these goods in sacrifices of praise, honor, and thanksgiving to the triune God (Gal. 4:6; 1 Cor. 12:3; Heb.

13:15; Rev. 4–5) and to share these goods, both spiritual and physical, with our neighbors (Rom. 12:3–8; Heb. 13:16; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

GOD'S OWN HAPPINESS IN HIS PEOPLE

By the Spirit, God pours his love into our hearts and awakens in our hearts the love of God and neighbor (Rom. 5:5; 1 John 4:10, 12–13, 19). The love poured into our hearts by the Spirit trains us rightly to affirm the being and well-being of God and of all things in relation to God, and it trains us rightly to exchange the goods of heaven and earth in fellowship with God and all things in relation to God. Such love is the bond of perfection in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (Col. 3:14), the good that surpasses all others in the order of beatitude (1 Cor. 13:13).

And so, by the mercy of God, the blessed Trinity makes miserable sinners blessed in him. Flowing from the Father's love in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, by his humiliation and exaltation, causes his joy to dwell in us and thereby makes our joy full (John 15:11). The Father, who rests in his Son by the Spirit, and the Son, who by the Spirit rejoices in his Father, by the same Spirit come to rest in us, causing us to rejoice in them (John 14:23).