



LESSON 3

happiness

SAM CHAN

HOMEWORK REVIEW

(5 minutes)

Take a few minutes to share with your group where you saw the story of self at work in the world this past week.

WATCH THE VIDEO

(10-15 minutes)



Scan the QR code to watch the video.
Then follow along with the article as you watch.

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Walk through Times Square in New York City, and you can't miss it. The place just screams pleasure. The lights. The noise. The people. It's a stimulation overload. Crowds go there to be entertained. And why not? After all, Times Square represents the happiness-seeking passion of the United States of America, a nation founded on the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It's in the founding DNA; it's in the lifeblood of Western culture that we have the right to pursue pleasure on our own terms. And that's why if you ask most Westerners what they want for their children, they'll immediately tell you they want their kids to be happy. What better goal could there be?

Is Happiness the Best Goal?

This is the storyline we've been given, but it falls short for several reasons. The first is *hedonic adaptation*. What's that? Think of it this way: When you wake up in the morning and have your first cup of coffee, you get that wonderful buzz. But if you have another later in the morning, there's less buzz. Then, if you have a third cup in the afternoon, there's no buzz. What's happened? You've adapted to the coffee. You've gotten numb to it. It's the same with happiness. No matter how much we stimulate ourselves with pleasure, we become numb to whatever has made us happy.

HEDONIC ADAPTATION

The principle that the more we stimulate ourselves with pleasure, the more we become numb to it.

Happiness studies show that whatever makes us happy—a new job, a new car, or a new romantic partner—gives us an initial burst of pleasure. But that burst of happiness lasts one or two years (if we're lucky) before we're back to where we started. We just get numb again. You see it in the New York tourists. When they first arrive at Times Square, their eyes light up. They're so happy; they jump, clap, and laugh. They take selfies and upload them on social media. They say, "Look at me. Look at how happy I am!" Then, after a while, they stop and think, "Huh, is this all there is?" They become numb to it all and just walk away.

Another reason the happiness story falls short is what we call the *hedonic fallacy*. This principle says that just by chasing happiness, you're guaranteed not to find it. That's because happiness is ephemeral; it's always the by-product of something else. Chasing happiness is like chasing the rainbow. The rainbow always fades before you find it because it's only a by-product of the sun. If you want to find a rainbow, perhaps you should be chasing the sun instead.

HEDONIC FALLACY

The principle that if we chase happiness, we're guaranteed not to find it, because happiness is always the by-product of having some other desire fulfilled.

Something Even Better than Happiness

In a National Public Radio interview, a woman commented on parents who tell their children they just want them to be happy:

Be happy. I mean, if your parents tell you to get a job and make a certain amount of money, you know when you've achieved those things. But be happy? How are you supposed to know? It just makes you constantly question, Am I happy? How about now? Am I happy now?¹

1 Alix Spiegel and Hanna Rosin, hosts, *Invisibilia*, season 3, episode 7, "High Voltage (Emotions Part Two)," National Public Radio, June 1, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/530936928>.

She described how chasing happiness trips us up. But if running after happiness doesn't make us happy, what should we be chasing? In Luke 9:23–25 (NIV), Jesus says,

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?

Jesus says, “Chase me,” and he doesn't promise us happiness. He says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Pursuing Christ entails sacrifice, even hardship. Why would we want to do that? Because studies show that suffering, if it's purposeful, will make us a better person.²

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, tells a story of two women.³ One woman is born beautiful and rich, but at the end of her life when she thinks of all the money, parties, and flirting, she realizes that she had no purpose. Because she was self-absorbed, she died empty and unfulfilled. A second woman gives birth to a child with profound disabilities, and she has to care for this child her entire life. It's a hardship, and she struggles to understand the purpose in it. But when she looks back at her life, she says, “My life is full of meaning . . . I have done my best—I have done the best for my son. My life was no failure!” This woman ends her days fulfilled, because she lived for the sake of another. She lived for a story bigger than her own.

If we only live for ourselves, we'll end up bent, curved in on ourselves, twisted, broken, and distorted. This is what the Bible calls *sin*—to fall short of the glory God designed us for (Rom. 3:23), to turn our backs on God's bigger story for us. That's why Jesus says, “Follow me.” He wants to be the big story we live for—not just as the model for how to live but as the One

2 See especially Emily Esfahani Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness* (Crown, 2017) and Jen Oshman, *Why Is It So Hard to Be Happy?* TGC Hard Questions (TGC/Crossway, 2026).

3 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Beacon Press, 2006), 116–17.

who opens the door to God's great story for us by paying the penalty for our sin and giving us his new life.

Imagine going to New York City but only seeing Times Square. That would be sad, because there's so much more to New York. You could see the Statue of Liberty with its story of freedom. There are museums with stories of art, culture, and creativity.

SIN

To fall short of God's standard and rebel against his story.

But imagine if you had a reason to be in Times Square—a purpose or calling that took you there. Perhaps to see a friend, to demonstrate for a just cause, or to serve others and make a difference. Now you have a bigger story. Jesus says, "Follow me." Surrender to his bigger story for your life. Live for Jesus, and bring his love, mercy, and justice to this planet. Yes, there will be suffering. Yes, there will be hardships. Yes, there will be sacrifice. We may lose our lives, but we'll gain so much more.

That's the irony. By chasing rainbows, we won't find them. But if we chase the sun, we'll find rainbows. It's the same with happiness. If we chase happiness, we won't find it. But if we chase the Son, he'll fulfill us, and we just might find happiness along the way.

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REVIEW (10 minutes)

Discuss the following questions with your study group.

- What stood out to you from the video?
- Sam defined the happiness story as follows: "It's the lifeblood of Western culture that we have the right to pursue pleasure on our own terms." Give a specific example of where you've seen this message in our culture.

- How did Sam define hedonic adaptation? Where do you see hedonic adaptation at work in your daily life?
- How did Sam define the hedonic fallacy? How have you seen this principle at work in your life's pursuits?
- Sam said that suffering done for a greater purpose grows our character. Do you believe this is true? How have you seen this play out in your community?

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DIG DEEPER (20 minutes)

*Read **Luke 9:22–25** (NIV) out loud.*

²² And [Jesus] said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

²³ Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”

After reading the passage, take a few minutes to review the questions below on your own and then talk through them with your small group. Blanks are provided for any notes you may want to take about the passage.

Many first-century Jews expected the promised Messiah to be a powerful warrior who would deliver the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors and deliver them into a new age of influence and prosperity. How do Jesus's words in verse 22 adjust this understanding?

Jesus also tells his disciples that their lives must be modeled after his (v. 23). “Deny themselves” means to abandon selfish ambitions and goals. “Take up their cross daily” means to embrace the suffering Jesus predicted as an essential part of fulfilling his mission. It also means you’ll experience the “fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10, CSB) and have a closeness to Jesus you could never experience any other way. How does this call upend the disciples’ expectations? How does it upend your expectations?

The life of suffering that Jesus promises may seem jarring at first. Why is this cross-shaped life actually good news, not bad? How have you seen this to be true in your own life or the lives of others?

Before Jesus calls his disciples to take up their crosses (vv. 23–25), he announces that he must die and be raised (v. 22). As we experience suffering, how can remembering Jesus's death in our place bring us comfort?

How does this passage show that the happiness story falls short? What better story takes its place?

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CONVERSATION, PRACTICE AND APPLICATION (20 minutes)

Discuss the following with your study group.

- How have your friends and neighbors bought into the happiness story? How do you see them pursuing comfort and pleasure on their own terms?
- Why do you think they find the happiness story so compelling?
- What questions might you ask a friend to show how the happiness story falls short?
- Practice sharing the gospel with your group using Sam's "chasing rainbows" illustration.

Read this passage from Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning and discuss it with your group.

I then invited the mother of the handicapped son to imagine herself similarly looking back over her life. Let us listen to what she had to say as recorded on the tape: "I wished to have children and this wish has been granted to me; one boy died; the other, however, the crippled one, would have been sent to an institution if I had not taken over his care. Though he is crippled and helpless, he is after all my boy. And so I have made a fuller life possible for him; I have made a better human being out of my son." At this moment, there was an outburst of tears and, crying, she continued: "As for myself, I can look back peacefully on my life; for I can say my life is full of meaning, and I have tried hard to fulfill it; I have done my best—I have done the best for my son. My life was no failure!" Viewing her life as if from her deathbed, she had suddenly been able to see a meaning in it, a meaning which even included all of her sufferings.

Why is this woman's life more meaningful than that of someone who lives for personal comfort and pleasure? Is there someone in your life who would benefit from hearing this woman's story? Take time to pray for him or her right now.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Pursuing happiness for its own sake will never bring us the satisfaction we crave. Pray with your group that you would each better understand how a life lived with and for Christ brings the deep-seated joy and purpose that God designed you for.

Father, you sent Jesus to suffer for us and only then to be raised and glorified. He promised us that a Christian's life of discipleship and fellowship with him will follow the same cruciform pattern. Help us to lay aside our selfish pursuit of comfort and pleasure on our own terms and to embrace the bigger story of your mission. Amen.

HOMework

Look for the happiness story in real life this week. You may find it in a book, magazine, movie, TV show, commercial, social media post, or conversation with a friend. Record what you see and be ready to share these observations with the group next week.

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LEARN MORE

To learn more about the happiness story, check out these resources:

Beginner

Amy DiMarcangelo. *A Hunger for More: Finding Satisfaction in Jesus When the Good Life Doesn't Fill You*. TGC/Crossway, 2022.

Timothy Keller. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy*. 10Publishing, 2012.

Jen Oshman. *Why Is It So Hard to Be Happy?* TGC Hard Questions. TGC/Crossway, 2026.

Intermediate

Randy Alcorn. *Happiness*. Tyndale Momentum, 2015.

C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. Geoffrey Bles, 1952. Reprint, HarperOne, 2001.

Andrew Wilson. *Happiness: What It Is, Where to Find It, and How to Make It Last Forever*. Crossway, 2026.

Advanced

Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. 1946. Reprint, Beacon Press, 2006.

Jonathan Haidt. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. Basic Books, 2006.

Emily Esfahani Smith. *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness*. Crown, 2017.