

HOLY UNHAPPINESS

God, Goodness, and the Myth of the Blessed Life

AMANDA HELD OPELT



New York • Nashville

INTRODUCTION

I am a reluctant memoirist. I'm not sure the world really needs another privileged person like me telling her story and tout-ing advice. There's something inherently suspicious about a woman who has a solid roof over her head, food on her table, two healthy kids, and a really nice husband writing a book about unhappiness.

I've heard it said that authors will often write the book they want to read—the book they need but that doesn't yet exist. The great mystery, though, is why a person like me would feel the need for a book about unhappiness. My life, in many ways, is a picture of blessedness. It has been from the beginning.

I was born in the Bible Belt, raised in a middle-class family of four. Mine was a stable and trauma-free household of Jesus-loving people. We weren't rich, but we always had everything we needed. My parents are some of the most gracious and thoughtful people I've ever known. I was surrounded by kindness, a strong community, and plenty of opportunities to make a good start in life. I was surrounded by love.

My life has been marked not only by blessing, but also by good behavior. The path I've walked is one well worn by many people of faith who have gone before me. I grew up, went to an evangelical Christian college, and married a nice Christian boy just like my

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mother told me to. Having always been taught that service to others was important and admirable, I've spent the last fifteen years working in various ministries at home in the US and abroad. For the most part, I've made good decisions—grown into a responsible human adult. I followed the blueprint I was given, and I don't regret it. Some might even say I am a good person, a godly person. I do nice things for people. I volunteer and give to charity. I go to church regularly. I recycle. My husband and I now live in a lovely little town nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina with our two small kids. We still aren't rich, but I still have everything I need.

This is not to say that I have never known hardship or failure. Like most people's lives, mine has had its ups and downs. I have experienced some losses: the sudden death of my sister, who was my only sibling; a season of infertility; a health challenge or two. I still carry deep pain from these losses, still have many days when I move through the world as a mourner.

Still, all in all, anyone looking at my life would say the scales have tipped toward blessing for me. Despite the grief I've known, I have had a good life by any reasonable standard. I am comfortable, safe, and secure. In the grand scheme of history, I enjoy unprecedented prosperity and freedom. Technically speaking, I have just about everything I've ever wanted.

Yet, I have known unhappiness. Deeply.

This book won't begin like other self-help books I've read, where the author experiences a moment of acute crisis on a yoga mat or a heartbreaking epiphany on the bathroom floor of her suburban home, sending her on a journey of self-discovery and rebirth. My unhappiness did not descend on me like some grand revelation. It has been more like a slow drip of disappointment. I've lived with it

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for almost as long as I can remember, but I wouldn't call it clinical anxiety or depression. The feeling is something akin to restlessness, like an ever-present anticlimax. It feels like lack, almost as if I am expecting something out of life that has not yet been delivered. Sometimes the sadness looms large, feels like a boulder I'm carrying. Sometimes it's as small as a pebble in my shoe. But it is always there, pressing painfully in at every step.

Put succinctly, I feel like *life* has let me down somehow.

I understand how off-putting this must sound. Having worked in humanitarian aid and social services, I know what real deprivation looks like, so I feel the cringeworthiness of all this even as I type it. And I feel confusion. Frankly, my feelings are a bit baffling. What could a person like me—with all the love I've been given and all the material comforts I've enjoyed—possibly have to complain about? What is it, exactly, that's bothering me so much?

Why doesn't my very, very blessed life *feel* like a blessing?



The concept of blessedness has had a long and storied history, particularly within religious circles. The prosperity gospel—a popular expression of faith within the Protestant Christian religion—has worked hard to corner the market on the #blessed life. This “gospel” emerged in the late nineteenth century as a mix-and-match doctrine of New Thought ideology and Pentecostalism. New Thought—which was a nineteenth-century spiritual movement disseminated by mesmerists, healers, and philosophers—emphasized the power of the mind to achieve success and affluence. Physical reality, its proponents taught, had its origin in the mental and metaphysical spheres. Followers of New Thought believed

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positive thinking could lead to wealth, and prayers for restoration could lead to health.¹ Most of today's popular self-help books are ideological descendants of this movement. Theirs is the staunch insistence that we can control our outcomes by our own efforts, self-confidence, and optimism.

After the turn of the century, New Thought began to influence some of the leadership within the Pentecostal Church, which was experiencing a series of revivals in America. Pentecostalism—with its emphasis on the individual's personal relationship with God, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and the power of divine healing—embraced the notion that there is authority in the spoken word and power in positive thinking. Great faith can accomplish great things in our lives. Thus, the Word of Faith and prosperity movements were born.

By the mid-1900s prosperity faith healers and revivalists began asking their followers for “seed money,” tithes and donations to be given to the ministry. Healers promised tithers that these funds would be returned to them by God sevenfold, thirtyfold, even a hundredfold.² This false promise funded the personal empires of prosperity televangelists and influencers. A series of scandals including fraud and extramarital affairs plagued the movement in the 1980s, with many of its leaders being widely criticized for their lavish and opulent lifestyles.

The prosperity gospel of today has experienced a nice recovery, with its new leaders enjoying huge sway in the world of Christian publishing and media. Many of America's megachurches are of the Word of Faith tradition, and the movement has gained huge ground in countries across Africa and Asia. While its current iteration is a bit toned down from the days of gaudy stage furniture, pink hair, and glittering promises, the core tenets remain:

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God desires for you to be healthy and wealthy. You are entitled to blessing. The abundant life can be achieved through the power of positive thinking and a confident word of faith. You will *always* reap what you sow. You are capable of great things if you only believe in yourself. Suffering is a result of a negative mindset or lack of faith.³ It is an ideology that pairs well with the modern wellness movement and situates itself nicely in the abundance of our twenty-first-century American lifestyles.

Every church I've ever been part of has rejected the prosperity gospel outright—named it a pariah within Christendom. Growing up I was taught that adversity was nothing to be feared, that poverty and sickness were to be expected. They were not a sign of failure on my part or a lack of favor on God's part. I never felt entitled to affluence and always believed that God was good even when my circumstances were not.

But despite my well-constructed theology of suffering, there are elements of the prosperity gospel's values that feel vaguely familiar to me. While I did not believe that God was a vending machine for material abundance, I did expect God to make me *happy*, to bless me spiritually and experientially. This expectation was nurtured by a million different messages, some implicit and some explicit, that I received from my community of faith. Believe the right things and you will *feel* the right way, or so the assumption goes. God may not grant me health and wealth. But most certainly, he was supposed to grant me *emotional* prosperity: fulfillment in work, meaning in ministry, intimacy with God, and purpose in suffering.

This gospel seemed way less menacing to me than a gospel that esteems money and sees illness and death as a sign of failure. But the emotional prosperity gospel is its own subtle form of heresy,

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a narrative woven together by threads of half-truths and plenty of proof texts. A theology that is partially true and partially false is especially insidious because it's easy to defend and difficult to denounce. You end up getting pulled along by its wise and appealing pieces and confused by the bits that don't quite square with Scripture or reality. I never thought to question it, never imagined it would lead me astray.

In many ways the ideology was “caught, not taught,” as they say. This set of propositions crept its way into the language of popular Christian books, music, sermon series, and wall decor. It permeated the evangelical churches I attended. It was a sacrosanct rendition of “the good life.” We weren't necessarily conscious of it, but we maintained that same sense of entitlement characteristic of the health and wealth gospel. God wants to bless me. *God wants to make me happy.* Make good choices and peace will be the norm and pain an aberration. There were divine reciprocities that were mine to be had:

Get a good job, and you'll be happy.

Marry and have lots of kids, and you'll be happy.

Discover God's will for your life, and you'll be happy.

Grow close to God, and you'll be happy.

I was living in the shadow of this cosmic equation, this intoxicating formula for what the good life would look like: If this, then that. Give this, and you'll receive that; sow this and you'll reap that. Cause and effect. My seed money was my theological acumen, my good behavior, and my good choices. And the return on investment would be deep, abiding joy.



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More than a decade ago, when I was a newlywed struggling with marriage, work, and ministry, I was having coffee with my friend Reva. We were talking about how surprisingly difficult marriage can be and I said to her through tears, “I just feel like a failure... like something is wrong with me!”

Reva, with her dark, earnest eyes and pensive smile, replied back: “Or maybe it’s not you at all! Maybe there’s something wrong with the *system*, Amanda.” Her voice trembled a bit, brimming with both compassion for me and contempt for said system. Reva is very smart, so I figured she knew what she was talking about. I nodded vigorously back at her. “Yeah!” I exclaimed in reply. “Totally! The system is *so* messed up!”

Honestly, though, I had no idea what she meant by “the system.” I remember nervously thinking to myself, *Um... what system?* But instead of asking her to explain more, I just wiped the tears from my eyes, took another gulp of coffee, and the conversation moved on.

Looking back, I think I now understand what Reva meant. I’m realizing that every category of our lives—whether it’s work or marriage or friendship—has a system associated with it, a set of assumptions and underlying beliefs that inform our experiences and expectations. Some of these beliefs grew from philosophical, theological, and sociological developments that find their roots far back in history. It’s wild how a famine, plague, war, technological innovation, political crisis, or religious awakening that occurred centuries before our lifetimes can shape a society’s mindset for years to come. Our longings, our tendencies, our inclinations, and our definitions of “good” and “bad” are not born out of thin air. For all our claims of individualism, freedom of feeling, and autonomy of

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thought, there are forces at work outside of us that have built the mental and psychological scaffolding of our lives.

Before I tell you what this book *is*, I will tell you what it *is not*. It is not a comprehensive inquiry into these historical and philosophical forces. It is not an exhaustive theological analysis of what it means biblically to flourish or to be blessed. I won't exactly be presenting you with a thesis. I don't claim to have found the secret to true happiness, and I won't be leaving you with a ten-step program that will lead to a life of blessing.

This book is simply my story. It is an account of what it was like to encounter sadness in my shoes, as a female, millennial, white, American Christian. I recognize that no one person's experience of modern America is exactly the same. Moreover, Christianity in America—even *evangelical* Christianity in America—is not a monolith. But this is *my* experience. And my gut tells me that if you've picked up this book, you'll recognize some of your own story in mine.

I've written about nine facets of life that I believe have been tainted by the emotional prosperity gospel. These are the down payments we make on happiness, the "if this, then that" conditions and assurances we embrace as trustworthy and true. I'll explore the myths we believe about these areas of life and the ways we've idolized them as mechanisms for meaning and fulfillment. I'll examine the choices we make and the expectations that come with those choices. I'll be looking not only at my own expectations, but also at society's expectations and, more specifically, the Church's expectations. So yes, you will find a little bit of history here—and some theology too. But I am writing this book very much as a learner, as someone who is still in process. At its core this book is the story of the disappointment—and sometimes shock—I felt when

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none of these facets of life consistently delivered the psychological outcomes I expected. You may find that the words meander a bit, as words are prone to do when we are trying to make sense of an experience.

And so, it is with a healthy dose of humility that I will also share three ways I am learning to reimagine goodness. These are not prescriptive blessings, but they are descriptive of what I found to be the backbone of *true* happiness once some of those myths and excesses melted away. You'll find those reflections at the end of each section of the book. My hope is that I am slowly learning to trade my expectations of "the good life" for a deeper form of goodness—blessings that are simpler but sturdier. More durable.

No doubt, my deepest conviction will likely rise to the surface throughout: I no longer believe that my sadness makes me a failure, that my restlessness means there is something wrong with me. The notion that if I am *good* then my experiences and my feelings will always be *good* is a myth. Life is hard no matter how many good choices you make. People die and disasters befall us, certainly. But there is deep pain even in the small, daily afflictions: Work is wearisome, relationships are frustrating, our resolve is finite, and our optimism fails. Even our "blessings" come with a cost. Despite our faithfulness to all the spiritual disciplines, God can sometimes feel achingly absent. Life often demands more of us than we know how to give. We are not as strong as our circumstances require us to be. Simply being human is a rigorous endeavor.

But no one really wants *that* hand-lettered and hanging on their wall.



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What exactly is “the good life”? What does it mean to be happy?

These are the questions, of course, that troubled me when I first began writing this book. Humans have struggled to define happiness since the dawn of time. In the course of my study, I learned that for the ancient Greeks, happiness was not so much a subjective feeling experienced in the moment, but rather the characterization of an entire life—one of honorable achievements, familial health, and public esteem. Happiness can be measured only at the end of one’s life when all things have been considered. While virtue has always been associated with the concept of “the good life,” for most of human history, happiness was thought to be primarily the result of luck, fate, or a gracious act of the gods.⁴ A mere human couldn’t hope to achieve happiness for himself, no matter his virtue. Likewise, prolonged sadness, or *melancholia*, was believed to be an unlucky imbalance of the *humours*, or bodily fluids.⁵

Even our language is evidence of this perceived lack of agency. When the Greeks spoke of happiness, they often used the noun *eudaimonia*, comprising the Greek *eu* (good) and *daimon* (god, spirit, or demon), indicating that the good life was in the hands of unseen benevolent—or malevolent—spiritual beings. The root of our English word “happiness” comes from the Middle English and Old Norse *happ*, which means “chance” or “fortune.” Words like “haphazard,” “hapless,” and “perhaps” all find their origin in this term. The French word for happiness is *bonheur*, derived from *bon* (good) and *heur* (luck). Romance languages draw their words for happiness from the Latin *felix*, which means “fate” or “luck.”⁶

It was only during the age of Enlightenment—with its emphasis on reason, individual freedom, and human rights—that our

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modern conceptions of happiness began to truly take shape. Our American forefathers classified the “pursuit of happiness” as a self-evident, unalienable right in our government’s founding documents, a sign of the changing times. And while many scholars speculate that for Thomas Jefferson, “happiness” as stated in our Declaration of Independence was likely defined more in terms of economic opportunity, material security, and social stability,⁷ most Americans have come to associate happiness with a sense of deep psychological fulfillment and self-actualization. It is a feeling experienced in the moment. We believe we are entitled not just to the pursuit of it, but to the attainment of it. It is almost as if one has a duty to oneself to achieve a happy life. Happiness is no longer a matter of fate, but of personal willpower.

Americans in particular maintain a special aversion to pain and suffering. We are incredibly proficient at avoiding hurt and putting on an optimistic face. If you are an American of European descent, it means that your ancestors initially came to these shores for the very purpose of *escaping* hardship. They were fleeing persecution, poverty, and oppression. The insistence on a better tomorrow is written on our DNA.⁸

We have our own venerated and time-tested formula: Work hard, make good choices, believe in yourself, and then your dreams will come true. This commitment to personal agency is the pioneering spirit of the frontier. Americans are always moving toward new horizons, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps through rugged self-reliance. The world’s leading scholar on the history of the prosperity gospel, Kate Bowler, believes that the theology of abundance gained such a foothold within the American religious landscape because it echoes the ideals our nation has cherished since its founding. She writes:

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The prosperity gospel was constituted by the deification and ritualization of the American Dream: upward mobility, accumulation, hard work, and moral fiber. If the prosperity gospel can be taken as a gauge of the nation's self-perception, this is surely a country soaring with confidence in the possibility of human transformation. The movement's culture of god-men and conquerors rang true to a nation that embraced the mythology of righteous individuals bending circumstances to their vision of the good life.⁹

It is impossible to overstate how much New Thought and the prosperity gospel have shaped the emotional landscape of this country. If positive thinking has the power to activate abundance, then negative feelings are marginalized, told they don't belong. We are a culture that has forgotten how to be sad. We don't know how to grieve or be angry. We palliate pain, and numb discomfort with drugs, entertainment, busyness, and productivity. We've marginalized unhappiness, removed it from our vocabulary. Most negative feelings have been pathologized, stigmatized, and named as being outside the realm of normal. Instead, we have normalized peace, prosperity, and positivity. We whitewash our narratives, leave out all the shameful failures of our American origin story. We close our ears to the truth. We insist on bliss. When a task or commitment or relationship becomes too emotionally difficult, we jump ship, lest the bad feelings weigh down our lives. We have a million different methods for "balancing our humours."

While Christians may claim to be more willing to suffer through and honor our commitments, we, too, have marginalized pain and sadness. Since the fourth century, "sadness"—or some

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version of it—has been included on the Church’s various lists of significant vices, most notably the seven deadly sins. Sometimes termed “acedia,” other times “sloth,” the core belief was that a dejection of spirit was an affront to God.¹⁰ Even though the early Church often venerated the *experience* of suffering as a pathway to glory, with many aspiring to martyrdom, the emotional reaction of sadness was rarely acceptable.

To this day, Christians have a way of labeling negative emotions as unholy, insinuating that difficult feelings like fear, listlessness, anger, or anxiety are the result of a lack of trust in God. More than once, I remember a preacher saying something to this effect: “God gets ahold of us through the mind and intellect, and Satan gets ahold of us through the heart and emotions.” This led me to believe that emotions were not to be trusted, particularly difficult emotions. They were sinister, an indication of a poorly formed theology. Sadness is sin. Worry is wicked. Truth can tame *any* ungodly emotion.

And so, for the better part of my life, whenever I experienced difficult emotions, I’d recoil. I’d feel shame. I’d think of myself as a failure. I’d run through a script of pithy pious statements to try to convince everyone, including myself, that I was fine. I was *just fine*. I’d prove my holiness by demonstrating my happiness.

I’m too blessed to be stressed.

God won’t give me more than I can handle.

Everything happens for a reason.

I should just let go and let God.

Pray more; worry less.

Faith over fear.

Somewhere along the way, these statements stopped being enough. I was no longer able to pretend I was okay. My sadness

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was getting the better of me. The formula had broken down. I was lost. My evangelical upbringing had prepared me for the concept of suffering, but not for the actual experience of it.

The reason I overcame my memoirist impostor syndrome and ultimately decided to write this book was because I know I'm not alone. Almost every day, I meet fellow humans, and even fellow believers, who have that look of having been hoodwinked. They've made all the right decisions and done all the right things, and still, life *feels* hard for them. I wrote the book *I* needed to read because I'm certain there's at least one other person out there who needs these words as much as I do.

In this book, I make an attempt to befriend my sorrow rather than begrudge it. I've decided that my sadness has something to say, and my discomfort has something to teach me about myself, about God, and about the world around me. And though I have tried to reimagine what it truly means to be blessed, you won't find the familiar "blessing in disguise" trope here. You'll soon discover I'm not wild about the concept of silver linings, and I don't like being pressured to always find a purpose for my pain.

This is a book for people who are curious about their discontent, for people who are tired of numbing and ready to feel, for people who are willing to normalize sorrow and rescue it from the margins. It is a book that investigates the cost of our commitment to optimism, and tries to understand if there is a blessedness to be found beyond our sacred formulas, positive feelings, and saccharine sentiments. This is a book for people who think that perhaps there is holiness to be found in their unhappiness.

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end of this excerpt of Holy
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