



Norman Carr

Does God want us to be happy? Of course he does! At least, I think he does. He probably does. He might...I don't know if he does or not. Sorrow certainly abounds, and the pursuit of happiness leads to dead ends for so many.

McDonald's Happy Meal, the happy face, and the *happy camper* are icons of American culture. I believe they illustrate the notion put forth in Eric Wilson's controversial book, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, that Americans too often confuse happiness with tepid satisfaction. If he is correct, that's pretty sad. You are invited over the next seven days to explore happiness via a detour through the topic of sorrow. If you decide to take the journey, I wish you...happy trails?

Lois and I can be found in Wichita and in the *happy couple* category. Now that she has joined me in retirement, we can leave Kansas more often. Oh, yeah, we're happy about that. We expect broader horizons like Lindau, Germany, in the above photo. We attend Northridge Friends Church where we find the spiritual enrichment and encouragement to grow daily in Christ.

BIBLE READING: Psalm 107:28-31

Late in the spring of my twelfth year, our family station wagon arrived at the farmhouse of relatives I had never met. Even before we exited the car, an elderly woman waved from her front porch and warmly motioned for us to hurry in as if she couldn't endure another minute of waiting. My father's cousin had a feast prepared. Over dessert she commented on how I fancied her date cake. Yes, I fancied it as well as the rich fresh-from-the-cow whipped cream heavily ladled on top. I fancied slice after slice.

Nothing was fancy about my long night of suffering and nausea that began a couple of hours after my overindulgence. The following morning I was more embarrassed than sick and dreaded facing my host family. But when I came to the breakfast table, no one took notice. The grownups sipped coffee with indifference. Women dabbed hankies under their eyes. Men shook their heads. Pauses in conversations stretched painfully until someone explained softly to me that three local teenagers, the village's very best, had been killed during the night when their car was struck by a train. Sorrow had joined our gathering, personified and seated among us, an uninvited guest that had ladled grief heavily on our plates. For the first time in my young life, I was sick from sadness.

Sorrow is an incursion we must accept as part of our fallen world, but we need not endure it alone. Though sorrow seems unbearable at times, God will ease our suffering if we accept the warm invitation into our Father's mansion.

SONG: Jesus Is All the World to Me

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God our Comforter, even in sorrow's darkness may we recognize your invitation to take refuge from the world.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 5:6

In 1988, Bobby McFerrin won a number of Grammy awards for singing, “Don’t worry, oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo, be happy.” How could one not be happy back then? While the ditty floated on the airwaves, the world tapped its foot, smiled, and sang along. The sentiment faded long ago, and now I fret about happiness, I’m sad to say.

Turning through Scriptures, I read about Job, the valley of death, pestilence, wars, and then there’s the crucifixion. Christ came down from glory and performed miracles that restored health, eyesight, and even life. Some folks got happy but others accused Jesus in court, rioted for his death, and nailed him to a cross. Sorry, Bobby: I am weak and I worry sometimes.

Odd timing, perhaps, but I did get happy during a Christmastime funeral last year when a minister spoke of my late uncle’s modest life. My relative lived in Christian joy despite years of physical pain. The pastor quizzed mourners about what they might gain from sorrow and suffering and how they might find joy during difficult times.

The quiz provoked me to realize that sorrow is God’s tap on my shoulder. It slows me down, quiets me, and notifies me that he needs my full attention. When I submit, God’s healing dispels the darkness as surely as day follows night and a brilliant sunrise renews a battered spirit. His peace brings to mind the simple lyric, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” To that I would add only, “Oo, oo-oo-oo, oo-oo-oo” and “Amen.”

SONG: His Eye Is on the Sparrow

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, you are my comforter in difficult times. You provide me opportunities to sing your praises and witness to your goodness.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 2:9

Many listings of the world's best art museums include the Musée d'Orsay in Paris with its acclaimed collection of impressionist masterpieces. I am happy to spend hours there looking closely at composition, color, and even individual brush strokes.

Light, illustrated by bright, varied, and contrasting colors, helps define impressionism. For example, shadows will seldom be rendered in black or gray; instead, they have been painted with various colors. To quote the impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "No shadow is black. It always has a color. Nature knows only colors." The impressionists are not known as a religious lot; yet, I think of them when I sing this line from an old hymn: "Fill us with the light of day!" ("Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee").

If suffering casts a gloom over my life, I must resist allowing the shadows to become black. And, like Paul in prison, I want not just to resign myself to difficult situations but also to find contentment in all things, to paint my shadows with color. In my struggle, God through his grace gives me the resources to see color where I would see none. God is the light that drives away the darkness of sorrow, loss, anxiety, doubt, and pride; the light that calls me out of the darkness of sin (Isaiah 9:2); the light that fills my heart and mind; the light that displays the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

SONG: Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father, creator of this glorious universe, in the very beginning you said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Your love draws me out of my dark shadows and into the comfort of your wonderful light.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: Romans 8:18-21

In my travels I've had to beg pardon for my French, German, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi. I have even pleaded for forgiveness from a few English teachers for my misuse of the mother tongue. But maturity has increased my appreciation for language, including foreign words so unique that they do not translate well. One such example is the French word *terroir*: *the distinct and complex quality of specific soil, often in a vineyard. Terroir has been described as a gift of nature that establishes the character of the grape.*

In a recent TV interview, a French vigneron explained *terroir* to someone who had commented on the poor soil as they walked through a vineyard. "This is what the vine needs. It needs to suffer to produce grapes of character," explained the winemaker. The struggle, she insisted, produces the fruit's wonderful complexity of aromas and taste. The fruit is sublime not despite the plant's hardship, but because of its struggle.

God is our gardener and if we trust his season of pruning, we will grow though we suffer. Temporal pain will not uproot; instead, it will contribute to spiritual growth if we stay grounded in his light. Life wasn't lost in the poor soil at the foot of the cross—it was gained! Christ suffered the world's cruelty, but he lives. And the fruits of his resurrection are eternal life for those who believe.

SONG: God Will Take Care of You

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father, you are my comforter. You shape me in my seasons to weep, to laugh, to mourn, and to dance. Your pruning helps me grow spiritually. Brace me so that I remain firmly planted in my faith and trust.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: Lamentations 3:22-25

A former colleague seemed to live life pitched on a stormy sea barely distinguishable from dark clouds overhead. To tell her story, I fear, would exploit her many sorrows. Besides, the depth and breadth of her trials might not seem credible to a reader who has never been exposed to such suffering. If you do know a woman or man of constant sorrows—someone tossed by unrelenting waves and struggles to reach a safe harbor but is carried farther from shore—say their name during your prayer of intercession at the end of this devotional.

Of course, you do know the story of one whose scars testify to his suffering, crucifixion, and triumph over death; one whose light is eternal and shines to the deepest depth we might sink and dispels all darkness; one whose name is the sweetest we know.

After his crucifixion, Christ showed his scars as proof of his resurrection. Today *we* reveal his scars to a doubting world. If you have suffered, perhaps your witness can more effectively relate this message: those who remain anchored in him shall not perish. A songwriter sings, “I believe no tear goes wasted,” (Iris Dement, “The Shores of Jordan”) and they won’t be wasted if we channel them for the glory of God. He will surely give us wisdom and strength to share with a stormy world his comforting words: “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36).

SONG: Living for Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father who provides comfort to the suffering, calm the storm and hold _____ in the safe harbor of your grace. Grant me the wisdom and compassion to reflect your light and peace into someone’s storm.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 1:6-7

My personal experience with deep sorrow is limited, so I surrender this page to gifted writers whose understanding extends far beyond that of eating too much date cake. When sorrow overwhelms, the following authors would have you *consider tender surrender*.

Hannah Whitall Smith concludes *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* by encouraging flight from life's storms on "wings of Surrender and Trust." We cannot escape unhappiness in this world, but we can take comfort at God's side where sorrow "loses its power to harm or distress us."

In *Purity of Heart*, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns about *the wish*: the desire of comfort and avoidance of suffering. He insists that dependency on "comfort which this world affords" permits you to forget suffering and consequently to forget God, thereby sacrificing the eternal joy gained by those who place their hope, faith, and love in God. Kierkegaard suggests you "think that over properly."

St. John of the Cross describes in *Dark Night of the Soul* how acceptance of hardships actually benefits the "beginner," the individual beginning to grow spiritually. God "sets them down from His arms and teaches them to walk on their own feet" away from temporal pleasures and to a mature relationship with him.

These authors would not have you submit to disappointment and doubt, but surrender to the power and reclamation of God's grace. Yes, think that over properly.

SONG: I Surrender All

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, you are my comforter. I come to you when my path is hard and my steps become weary. In difficulties may I take inspiration from the hard road to the cross that Christ walked while carrying my burdens.

—Norman Carr

BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 5:17

Imagine the scene in Bethlehem: Joseph overjoyed, Mary and baby doing fine. The couple count his little fingers and toes, find him perfect, and think how sweet to hold a newborn baby. But it is a hard road from that night in Bethlehem (silent except for angels singing adoration) to Golgotha with the shouts, “Crucify him!” Along the poignant passage from Christmas to Easter, Christ was threatened, challenged, tempted, betrayed, rejected, despised, mocked, persecuted, insulted, scorned, denied, humiliated, tried, and sentenced by those he came to save. And he was crucified—those perfect hands and feet hammered to the cross.

A large stone closed the tomb *and* a sensational chapter in history, but the Golgotha narrative does not end with suffering or death in a dark cave. The stone rolled away to reveal an empty tomb—empty except for the light that dispelled the darkness, a light for the entire world. This “light of glory” is mentioned in the song “Because He Lives.” In his autobiography, Bill Gaither shares a personal darkness during a deep depression years ago and describes the role his suffering played in completing this song of victory.

The resurrection does not save us from a hard road with human sorrows; it saves us from our selves and offers eternal life. Our Christian journey begins with joy for a baby in Bethlehem, but the destination is our personal Golgotha and our death to self—death so that we might live.

SONG: Because He Lives

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father, in you we find comfort and joy. As winter gives way to spring and gray skies yield to the sun, may my old self pass so that I can become a new creation in the resurrected Christ.

—Norman Carr