

PHIL WALDREP

HAPPY

*"A wise and comforting  
companion no matter  
what you're facing today."*

LYSA TERKEURST,  
New York Times bestselling author

*stop* HA  
Y *chasing*

HAPPY

OPY

*and start pursuing  
your purpose*

HAPPY



## CONTENTS

1. Better than Happy ..... 13
2. Purpose Starts with a Mission ..... 35
3. Purpose Reveals Your Potential ..... 51
4. Purpose Offers Perspective ..... 73
5. Purpose Overcomes Pain ..... 89
6. Purpose Produces Security ..... 101
7. Purpose Clarifies Your Past ..... 117
8. Purpose Gives You Goals ..... 137
9. Purpose Values Relationships ..... 153
10. Purpose Provides Contentment ..... 169

## CHAPTER 1

# *Better than* HAPPY

*Rejoice in the Lord always;  
again I will say, rejoice.*

Philippians 4:4

I thought it was going to be another routine trip.

I left my office Wednesday afternoon, made two quick stops to get the laundry, and grabbed something for Debbie, my wife, and me to eat for dinner. When I arrived home, Debbie had everything packed for our trips the next day. I was flying to the Northeast to speak at the memorial service of a friend. Debbie was driving to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, to

start preparations for our Women of Joy conference that weekend. I would join her later in the week.

The next morning, Debbie drove me to the airport. After she stopped at the curb, I kissed her goodbye, grabbed my bag from the back seat, and headed to the security screening. Little did I know that in the next few days I was going to have four encounters that would change how I view life.

At the airport, I quickly passed through security and walked to my gate. I found a chair with some privacy and sat down. Moments later, the gate agent called my name. I hoped it was good news, and it was.

“Mr. Waldrep, thank you for your platinum status with our airline. I am pleased to tell you that you have been bumped up to first class,” the agent said. She smiled and handed me my new seat assignment.

“Thank you! You just made my day,” I said in response.

Any experienced traveler knows there is a distinct difference between a seat in coach class and one in first class. The seat in first class feels like a recliner. The flight attendants ask you every few minutes if they can get something for you. It is called first class for a reason.

And the people who sit in first class are different too. They tend to be wealthy because they have the money to buy an expensive ticket—or, like me, they travel extensively, rack up frequent flyer miles, and get promoted because of their status with the airline. Either way, first-class passengers rarely talk to each other.

After I boarded the plane, I casually put my carry-on bag away

in the overhead and tucked the latest biography I was reading into the holder on the back of the seat in front of me. I looked at the other boarding passengers, wondering which one would sit by me.

Before long, a young woman who appeared to be no older than 21 sat by me. She was a beautiful, pleasant young lady, but she seemed out of place. In one sense, it would be odd for a young lady her age to have a position with a company that allowed her to travel frequently enough to get upgraded to first class. And in another sense, she didn't appear rich enough to buy the ticket. I confess that I stereotyped her as a daughter from a wealthy family.

She didn't acknowledge me. She sat down quietly and started staring at the floor. I respected her privacy, so I took out my book and started reading. Before long, the plane was airborne.

Several minutes into the flight, the flight attendant come through the cabin and asked if we would like some refreshments. I said, "Sure. I would like a diet soda." The young lady didn't speak. She only shook her head left to right, answering "no" with her body language.

A few minutes later, when I took a sip of my soda, I noticed the young lady was crying. It was then that I noticed her swollen eyes—swollen like those of someone in the morning after they had cried most of the night. This girl was hurting—and hurting deeply.

I didn't know what to say or if I should say anything. But my minister's heart discerns pain very quickly. And my pastoral nature wants to heal a hurting heart.

From past experiences, I know that an airplane can be a lonely place for a broken heart. For a brief second, my mind flashed to the

tears on the cheek of a young chief petty officer in her Navy uniform who was escorting the body of her friend accidentally killed in a military exercise. I remembered the sobs of a young man flying home to bury his mother after she contracted COVID-19 and died quickly thereafter. In every case that I could recall, a weeping person on an airplane was a grieving person.

So, I naturally concluded that this young lady was headed home because someone died. I wanted to help her process her grief by listening or offering a prayer for her and her family. I quickly prayed a silent prayer and asked the Lord for wisdom.

With as much kindness as I could muster, I said, “Ma’am, I don’t mean to pry, but I noticed you are crying. I am a minister, and I’m also a dad—a dad with two daughters about your age. And, as a dad, I don’t like to see young ladies cry. I am willing to listen if you want to talk.”

“No, I’m fine,” she replied with a hint of anger. Then she added, rather apologetically, “but thank you.”

I simply smiled and turned my eyes to the pages of my book.

Then her voice broke the silence. She looked directly at me and said, “It’s not fair!”

She wasn’t screaming, but her voice was higher than the acceptable level for airplane conversations.

“It’s not fair! I worked for this all my life. I earned it. The other girl must have slept with a judge or something because she didn’t deserve it. And I’m not happy about it. In fact, I’m not happy, period! Do you understand?”

As I slowly glanced at the people around me, I noticed that

everyone was staring at me. They weren't sure what I said, but they were certain that I was the reason for this young woman being upset. Embarrassed, I immediately looked down and tried to appear that I was reading. Truth be told, I was feeling their stares. I started wondering when I could risk looking up again without seeing the agitation in the eyes of my fellow passengers.

Then, in a calm and lower voice, the young lady said, "Sir, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have responded that way. It's not your fault."

I looked at her, closed my book, and said, "You are right. I don't understand, but I sure would like to try to understand."

When I said those words, the young lady turned toward me with body language indicating that she was ready for a long conversation. "Well, my name's Jenna," she said as her right hand pulled the hair behind her ear.

"And I'm Phil," I replied.

With introductions behind us, Jenna began to share her story.

As a young girl, she struggled with a weight problem. All the girls in elementary school laughed and called her chubby. In junior high, none of the cool boys wanted to hang around her because they said that she was "too fat." Many nights she cried herself to sleep.

Although she never mentioned them, I assumed that her parents gave her love and support. It was the affirmation of her peers that she desired more than anything in the world.

Throwing her head back against the headrest, the tears slowly started flowing again. Then she continued. "I thought about becoming an athlete when I was in the ninth grade, but it didn't take me



long to realize that wasn't for me. Then, I remember, on my sixteenth birthday, I made a vow to myself. I determined right then and there that I would become the prettiest girl in America!"

I thought about these words for a moment. It is a decision many people make. They think that they can prove their value by getting people to admit they are wrong about them. And if they succeed in convincing others, it will validate their worth. Then these people will feel good about themselves and be happy.

I didn't express my analysis to Jenna. I continued to listen to her story.

"So, I started watching what I ate. I started going with my dad to the gym, and his trainer helped me exercise. By the time I was 17, I was starting to feel good about myself." Her tears were no longer flowing. I sensed, at least for the moment, she was entering a pleasant time in her life's story. "But the girls still avoided me. Boys too," she said as she openly wondered why. "I started accepting myself, and I thought that would make me happy, but it didn't. I needed them to accept me."

Jenna proceeded to tell me that she thought the perfect way to get them to accept her was to prove beyond any doubt that she was as pretty as any girl in the world. And the best way to do that was to enter beauty pageants. But not just any beauty pageant. She wanted to enter contests that qualified her to be in the Miss America pageant.

For the next four years, she took lessons on stage presentation, how to answer questions, and the way to smile. A consultant helped her pick her clothes. Before long, she was winning qualifying

contests to get into the coveted state titles that, in turn, would put her in the Miss America pageant.

But she kept winning only as the second or third runner-up. Never first place. And, for her, nothing but first place would do.

A little more than a week before we met on the plane, Jenna entered the final qualifying pageant for that year. She worked harder and prepared more than at any other time. She was certain she would win. But as the tears started flowing again, she told me she made the top ten. That was it. No first place, second or third runner-up. Just the top ten.

In her mind, that meant another girl was prettier, just like her friends said. Instead of validating her, the beauty pageants just confirmed her peers' cruelest words.

By now the wheels of the plane had touched the runway, and the pilot was starting to taxi to the gate. I knew our conversation was coming to a close.

"Well, Jenna, what are your plans now?"

My question was sincere, but I was hoping she would admit the futile efforts of trying to find value in the approval of others.

She smiled for the first time and said, "Well, I think I'm going to find a good-looking rich guy, get married, and have two wonderful kids. Yes, sir, that's what I'm going to do. And when I do," she continued as though she had found the answer to her problem, "I'm going to make sure all those kids who made fun of me in school hear about it. And the best part is," she said with a certainty that I had not heard in her voice, "I will finally be happy."

With those words, Jenna revealed her secret motivation. It wasn't

to prove she was beautiful. It wasn't to hear the bullies say they were wrong.

She wanted to be happy.

I began to wish our flight was longer. I wanted to share with Jenna the true source of happiness, but the door was opening, and we had to exit the plane.

“Jenna, it's been great talking with you. I assure you that my wife, Debbie, and I will be praying for you to find that happiness,” I said as we stepped off the plane.

## **The Happiest Woman I Know**

The next morning, the forecast called for cold temperatures and some snow flurries. Being from the south, I'm not accustomed to these late spring blasts of cold weather, but New Englanders are. Dressed in my suit and a long wool overcoat, I drove to the small church that was the site of the memorial service. I greeted friends, and the funeral director gave me some instructions as we discussed the order of the service. There would be a song, another minister would briefly read some passages from the Bible, then another song, and then I would speak.

None of that was out of the ordinary. Memorial services are a part of what ministers do on a regular basis, both as a participant in the program and as a person in the congregation paying respect. Services tend to follow the same basic structure. But then the funeral director added something different, at least from my experience. He said, “The family requested that we have a microphone on the floor

near the front and, after you finish your remarks, everyone who wishes may come and say a word about Marge.”

Marge was the deceased, the wife of a pastor in New England. For years, she faithfully served alongside her husband in meeting the spiritual, emotional, and sometimes physical needs of their community.

Just a few days before her death, Debbie and I had flown to Vermont to visit her in the hospital as she fought her final battle with cancer. Instead of being sad, Marge had us laughing the whole time we visited. Laughter, I knew, was physically painful for her, but she didn't mind. She called it a “good kind of pain.”

The nurses who came to her room often left with a tear in their eye. One said to us privately, “This is the happiest woman I know, and she is dying!”

That was Marge.

During the service, when the time came for me to speak, I tried to share words that would comfort the grieving family and friends seated in front of me. We laughed and cried as I recalled special moments from her life. And I reminded them of the hope that believers have in Jesus Christ. Then I announced that there was an open mic at the front if anyone would like to share a special memory.

One by one they came.

A single mom said, “I remember the time my baby was sick, but I had to go to work. I either had to stay home and go without pay or find someone to keep my sick child. Marge volunteered to come and stay.”

One man, who seemed out of place for a funeral by the way he was dressed, shared how Marge would bring him food when she saw him on the street. He was a homeless man whom Marge befriended.

Still another lady told of Marge listening to her daily phone calls shortly after her mother died and the grieving daughter needed a sympathetic ear.

Standing behind the pulpit, I occasionally glanced at my watch. I had a plane to catch, and time to make the trip was slipping away. Nearly an hour passed as individual after individual told about the impact Marge had on their lives.

Finally, a little girl about 12 years old walked to the microphone. Tears flowed down her cheeks. You could see that she was poor, and I assumed didn't have the best family life. Choking back tears, she said, "Mrs. Marge was the best hugger in the whole world, and for some of us who don't get a lot of hugs, I will miss her."

I tried to keep my composure.

After the little girl sat down, no one else spoke. It seemed inappropriate after the words we just heard.

I closed the service with a prayer, expressed my love to the family members, and drove away. Planes don't wait even for memorial services to end.

As I settled into my seat on the plane, I found myself contrasting Jenna, the young lady on my flight earlier, and Marge. Marge never entered a beauty contest. She never wanted to. Being the center of attention was never her desire. She preferred hugs to applause, feeding the hungry instead of building a trophy case, and helping single

moms with sick babies. And she had friends. Lots of friends. Friends who loved her for who she was and for the way she made them feel.

Jenna probably had just a few friends. The people around her, more than likely, were like her. They were people trying to prove their worth and were willing to use anyone or anything they could to do it. Yet, what she wanted was what my friend Marge possessed.

As I compared the lives of the two women, I couldn't figure out what Marge had that Jenna was missing. It was there, and it should have been obvious. But I needed to meet another person chasing happiness before everything came into focus.

## **Are You Happy?**

As I exited the plane at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, I realized that I had a little over two hours until my next flight departed. I decided I would go to the airline lounge—an area in almost every terminal reserved for their frequent fliers to rest. I checked in at the desk, grabbed a snack, and went to find a place to sit. Most of the seats in the large, open area were taken.

Then I remembered that there was a small room in the back. I walked into it and, as I expected, there were plenty of seats. I found one in the corner.

As I sat down, I placed my snack on the small table beside me and reached into my travel bag to remove my Bible and a notebook. I wanted to write down a few thoughts for a sermon I was developing, and this was the perfect time and place to do it.

In a few moments, two other people entered the area. I didn't look up when they sat down. Like people flying in first class, people

in airport lounges don't like to be disturbed. A few seconds later, however, I heard a deep, authoritative voice say, "Hey, are you a preacher?"

I instinctively knew he was talking to me.

I lifted my head and saw a gentleman standing with his arms folded, leaning against the doorway. He didn't appear to be the one who spoke, but I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Although he was in plain clothes, he had a police badge pinned to his shirt and a pistol strapped to his hip. Instead of speaking, he raised one finger to point at another man in the room, indicating where the question originated.

As I turned my head, I saw a beast of a man!

By beast I mean a man with biceps larger than my waist. His thighs looked like stone pillars on the front of a small-town community bank. Even his fingers had defined muscles!

When I made eye contact, he repeated his question. "Are you a preacher?"

"Yes, sir, I am," I said, hoping that he wouldn't beat me up for being one.

It was at that moment that I glanced down at the leather bag he was carrying. On the tag attached to it I saw the logo of a major professional wrestling group. I was looking at a real, live professional wrestler. Now I knew why he had muscles.

If this had occurred years earlier, I would have recognized him immediately. Like most young boys in the South, I watched professional wrestling earlier in my life. I stopped watching, however, when the language and the characters violated my moral conscience.

“What kind of preacher are you?” he asked. Before I could answer, he followed with another question: “Are you one of those preachers that believes God wants you to be wealthy and healthy?”

“No, sir. Not in the sense that I think you are asking,” I said with an uncertain assurance in my voice.

I was starting to feel like we were facing off in the ring, and he was starting to taunt me as his opponent. The uncertainty in my voice made it appear that I feared getting smacked on the side of my head if I said the wrong words.

Then he leaned forward, looked me straight in the eyes, and asked, “Well, tell me. Are you happy?”

That was the first time anyone ever asked me that question.

“Yes, sir. I am,” I said with a confidence that had not characterized my words before that point. And before I could think about it, I asked him, “Are you happy?”

“I’m trying to be,” he answered with the lack of confidence in his words that characterized mine a few minutes earlier.

Then I asked what he meant by “trying to be.” And like Jenna on my earlier flight, he started telling me his story.

He was born into a poor family. He didn’t have the kind of toys or clothes other kids did. There were days, he said, when they didn’t eat. But in high school he discovered weightlifting, and before long, his muscles made him the envy of the other boys. He joined the football team and became an outstanding athlete. But it was wrestling in high school where he excelled. Unlike the scripted professional matches, where the winner is determined in advance, high school wrestling was a matchup of strength and conditioning.



After high school, he went to work in construction and continued to lift weights to build his muscles—to “bulk up” as he called it. In the town where he lived, there was a promoter who staged wrestling matches. There were no television cameras or merchandise to buy. Just a ring with local wrestlers, all promoted by poorly printed signs at the local country store.

“I started going to these matches and decided to try it. I liked it, and I was good at it. Learned how to work the crowd,” he said, as though I had never witnessed what he was describing. “Then, a larger promoter saw me. Asked me to join with him. He sent me to school to learn how to be a professional at it. Started paying me too,” he said. “Before long, I quit my day job, and the rest is history.”

“That’s great, but it didn’t answer my question,” I responded, realizing that I was challenging a man who could crush me with one punch.

“And I said I was *trying* to be happy,” he answered with a look that told me not to push the issue. “You see, I’ve got all the cars I want, including a Porsche and a Bentley. Got a nice house too. Lots bigger than yours, I bet,” he said with a grin. Then he looked straight at me and said, “But someday I will have everything I want and everything I need, and then, I guess, I will be happy.”

After he spoke those words, the police officer he hired to keep fans away in the airport said, “It’s time to go.”

He grabbed his bag and stood to his feet. I stood to mine. I reached out to shake hands.

“Do you mind if I ask your real name?” I knew enough about

professional wrestlers to know that their wrestling names rarely were their real names.

“Randy.” He never offered his last name. He probably thought I could look it up on the Internet.

“Randy, I am going to pray that you find happiness. I doubt if you will find it in things. If you could, the happiest people in the world would be the richest,” I said as we shook hands.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.” And with those words, Randy walked away.

I sat down and picked up my Bible. I started to make the notes that I originally had set out to do.

But I couldn't. I kept thinking about Randy. And then I started comparing his life to mine.

I didn't grow up in a wealthy family. My father was a welder, and my mother worked in a laundromat. We were an average, middle-class Southern family. I never went hungry as a child. My family was loving and supportive. The community around me and my extended family were supportive too. It never occurred to me when I was young that I was blessed, but I was.

Later, God gave me a wonderful wife and two precious daughters. Today, we have two godly sons-in-law and five precious grandchildren. I lead a wonderful ministry and work with a great staff. Together, we touch thousands of lives every year. Unlike the wrestler, I can walk through airports without anyone recognizing me. No one stops me for my autograph or a quick photo. I don't need an armed guard to get me to my next plane.

Life is good.

As I thought about the handshake with the wrestler, I remembered how he looked into my eyes when he said *thank you*. I couldn't read his mind, but I think, for a moment, Randy wanted to say that he wanted to trade places. For some strange reason, I felt I was the first person who crossed his path who told him they were happy. And for a brief moment, I think he was envious.

Randy didn't show his emotions like Jenna, but I think they were both seeking the same thing. They wanted to be happy and were willing to do or try whatever was necessary to get it. But they failed to see that chasing happiness is like seeking a pot of gold at the foot of a rainbow. You never find it because the base of the rainbow is always a little further on the horizon. The pot of gold doesn't exist. It's a myth.

I left my seat in the lounge and walked to my gate for my flight to Knoxville. On board, I started wondering, "Why am I different from Randy? I mean, things are nice to have, but why am I content with the basics?"

And I thought again about Jenna and my friend Marge.

Jenna and Marge. Randy and me. Two pairs of people who are totally different. But what is the difference?

I was about to find out.

## **Created for a Purpose**

I arrived in Knoxville midafternoon, where I was met by one of our staff for the drive to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Pigeon Forge is a small resort town nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Along with its sister cities Sevierville and

Gatlinburg, it's one of the most popular destinations in the southeastern United States.

Because of the area's popularity, our ministry conducts several annual events in the city. One of the popular events we do is a three-day weekend conference called Women of Joy. At each conference, noted Christian musicians and popular speakers pour into the lives of thousands of women. And there is plenty of free time for fun and shopping too.

Friday afternoon, just before Debbie and I departed our hotel room for the opening session of Women of Joy, I received a phone call from a dear friend, Dr. Jay Wolf. Jay was the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He asked me for a favor.

"Sure, what do you need?" I replied.

"My son, Jay, and his wife are coming through your hometown next week, and I was wondering if they could stop and visit. They are starting a ministry, and they need all the advice they can get," Jay said.

"I would love to meet with them. Tell them to call me, and we will set it up," I said.

Debbie and I were excited about meeting his son and daughter-in-law, Jay and Katherine Wolf. Our excitement wasn't limited to doing a favor for a friend, but we wanted to hear their story personally.

Sunday afternoon Jay, his son, called. We set Tuesday morning as the time for us to get together.

(Jay bore the same name as his dad but instead of using a middle name or a nickname, he used Jay as well.)

Jay and Katherine personified the American dream. Both came from successful families. They met while students at college, and after graduating, they headed to California. Katherine dreamed of being a model and, possibly, an actress. Jay wanted to be an attorney. Moving to California allowed both to pursue their dreams—Katherine in Hollywood and Jay at the Pepperdine Law School.

On April 21, 2008, Jay, who was completing his finals, decided to drop by their home during a break from the tests. He found Katherine on the floor in the kitchen. Something was seriously wrong.

At the hospital, doctors discovered Katherine experienced a massive brain stem stroke. The stroke resulted from a ruptured arteriovenous malformation—a rare congenital defect. Her chances of living were slim.

Fortunately, Katherine had a wonderful neurosurgeon who performed a risky operation, and her life was spared. Months of therapy eventually allowed Katherine to regain the ability to speak and, with the aid of a walker, to slowly walk.

Debbie and I sat listening to her story, hanging on every word. Jay sat quietly, letting Katherine tell her story. Finally, I leaned forward. “Katherine, I have one question,” I said.

“Sure. Ask anything you like,” Katherine replied, assuming I was going to ask a medical question.

“When you realized that your dream of being a model and actress was vanishing, how did you feel? I mean, you had to be sad and depressed. Right?”

Debbie gave me a look that implied my question might have crossed the boundary of what is proper to ask someone the first

time you meet them. Looking back, however, I don't think I was asking for me. Subconsciously, I think I was asking for Jenna and Randy.

Katherine responded with a boldness and confidence you rarely find in a young person facing a lifetime of physical challenges.

"Not really," Katherine said. "I mean, I wasn't happy about it, but I've always believed I was created for a purpose. I originally thought it might be modeling or acting, but apparently God has a different purpose. The Lord is showing me what that purpose is, and I think it is to share my story to encourage people who are facing challenges in their own lives and to teach them about a God who loves them no matter what."

Jay added, "And we both believe that is our purpose now. It's going to be exciting to see how the Lord works."

But there was something different when they spoke. Theirs was a deep, confident joy that radiated from their faces. No sense of anxiety or bitterness. Just joy.

After we bid the Wolfs goodbye, I returned to my office and started making some notes in my journal. As I wrote her comment, the words gripped me. I read them again. This time I spoke them out loud.

"I've always believed I was created for a purpose..."

*That was it.* That was the difference between two beautiful young ladies pursuing careers as models. One had joy even when life didn't go as planned, and one felt that her world had come to an end when she didn't win.

And that Jay, whom many would advise to seek his own happiness

by leaving his wife, could share the same goal and find joy in the process still amazes me.

Jenna and Randy were both chasing happiness. They thought it was just one pageant crown away or just a few more dollars in the bank. They were seeking something that they would never find.

*You can find something  
better than happiness.*

Katherine Wolf taught me what my friend Marge knew. It was something Debbie and I knew but never could express in words. Fulfillment doesn't come from chasing happiness. Experiencing the best life has to offer doesn't come from having a perfect life with a perfect family living in a perfect environment. Joy comes from finding and doing what God created you to do, even when life is less than ideal.

Joy comes from finding your purpose.

It is discovering that everything about you—your talents, your personality, your appearance, even the time in history when you were born—was planned long ago by a God who loves you and invites you to be a part of His plan. And when you understand your purpose and pursue it, you find something that others rarely find. You find something better than happiness.

You find joy.

*Truth to*  
REMEMBER

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Your lack of joy comes from  
your lack of purpose. Find  
God's purpose for your life,  
and you will find joy.