

# WAS JESUS EVER HAPPY? HOW JOHN WESLEY COULD HAVE ANSWERED

by

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Over the centuries, much attention has been given to Jesus as a “suffering servant,” but the positive features of his inward constitution and the inherent value of his life for himself have been neglected, especially the question of his happiness. After I began to wonder about this, I found a few discussions of “Was Jesus happy?” on the internet, but none of these are particularly illuminating. The question, though, is interesting and important. This article will show how Wesleyans can answer this question affirmatively and intelligently—with the help of John Wesley.

In some sense, the suffering of Jesus cannot be overemphasized, but this may be done and has been done at the expense of, or to the neglect of, the positive values that were internal to and inherent within the life, experience, and constitution of Jesus. Without getting into or affirming any of the most disputed “facts” about the “historical Jesus,” this discussion will assume, with some New Testament scholars,<sup>1</sup> that a relatively non-controversial and historically reliable understanding of what Jesus was like, of his general personality and character, may be abstracted from the four Gospels. What Jesus was actually like within himself does have a significant bearing on the question of whether or not he was ever happy. Even if the real Jesus turns out to be too elusive to pin down, we can at least profit from an examination of Wesley’s understanding of “happiness” and how this might apply to ourselves. Before addressing the positive side of the life and inwardness of the Jesus of the Gospels, and how Wesley might assess his happiness, we must first ask: What is happiness?

At least two different concepts of the nature of “happiness” are present in Western thinking. First, the *hedonistic* understanding affirms that happiness consists of *nothing more than* as much pleasure as possible, and ideally no pain or suffering at all, over an extended period of time. Of

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

course, pleasures themselves differ in quality, some “higher” or “nobler” than others, as John Stuart Mill maintained,<sup>2</sup> and as Wesley earlier anticipated. Correspondingly, hedonistic unhappiness consists *only* of pains and sufferings, whether “physical,” that is, bodily localized, or “mental,” that is, psychological.

Second, the *eudaimonistic* understanding of happiness, dating back to Aristotle, is pluralistic. It includes pleasure along with a number of other happiness-making properties. Happiness consisting in actualizing our general human and uniquely personal potentials for *many* desirable “good for us” qualities, capacities, and relations. (Wesley would want to be sure that we are talking about actualizing our redeemed moral natures, not our sinful natures.) To avoid confusion with the hedonic view, this kind of happiness is often spoken of as “well-being,” “excellence,” “fulfillment,” “essence-actualization,” “self-realization,” etc. Actualizing pleasure is indeed one of our many desirable potentials. Pleasure is a very good thing, a very fulfilling thing, but pleasure *alone* does not constitute our complete well-being or happiness. Many additional “good for us” human capacities and properties are indispensable components of happiness, things like knowing, thinking, responsible choosing, diverse feelings and emotions, conscience and faithfulness to it, physical activities, adventure, sensory stimulation, desire satisfaction, and virtuous or moral motives, dispositions, and actions. Such things do not *produce* our happiness or well-being; their actualization *is* our happiness or well-being. All of these are typically accompanied by pleasures of some quality, but their positive happiness-value is far more than that of being mere sources of pleasure.

Correspondingly, eudaimonistic unhappiness includes but does not consist solely in pain and suffering. It also involves the loss, lack, absence, and the actualized contraries of eudaimonistic “good for us” properties, for example, the presence of ignorance, confusion, falsehood, evildoing, and miserable immoral dispositions, feelings, and “tempers” as Wesley called them.

Wesley himself identified our well-being or happiness with the redeemed, restored, and actualized potentials of the image of God within us. He wrote of “attaining all the image of God” and “advancing the image of God in us.”<sup>3</sup> This usually begins, he thought, with a drastic and sudden

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<sup>2</sup>See Rem B. Edwards, *Pleasures and Pains: A Theory of Qualitative Hedonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Wesley, “Satan’s Devices,” *Works*, 2: 143.

inner transformation (a new birth), but he reluctantly recognized that significant inner spiritual changes may be only gradual and almost imperceptible. Actualizing the image of God within us definitely involves ongoing and lifelong growth in spiritual and moral beliefs, experiences, motives, sensitivities, dispositions, and behaviors, all of which are indispensable components of human happiness or well-being. Each of us can only do this in our own unique and distinctive ways. This moral and spiritual growth constitutes the sanctification process. Sanctification, *becoming* holy, requires God's grace, enablement, and cooperation with us, and our own individual efforts, choices, and collaboration with God.

Wesley subscribed to a pluralistic or eudaimonistic understanding of human "happiness" or "well-being."<sup>4</sup> Happiness consists of actualizing an abundance of non-sensory pleasures, joys, and delights, along with many *additional* image of God internal capacities, likenesses, and relations. Here is his one of his definitions of "happiness": "And, first, without love nothing can so profit us as to make our lives happy. By happiness I mean, not a slight, trilling pleasure, that perhaps begins and ends in the same hour; but such a state of well-being as contents the soul, and gives it a steady, lasting satisfaction."<sup>5</sup> Happiness included what Wesley identified as the "nobler" pleasures, but much more as well. Hereafter, "happiness" will connote eudaimonistic well-being, and "Was Jesus ever happy?" will be about this kind of abundant living.

### *A Wesleyan Argument for the Happiness of Jesus*

Wesley *did not in fact* ask or answer, "Was Jesus ever happy?" What follows will show how Wesley *could have* made a strong case for regarding Jesus as a "happy servant" for much of his life—in addition to being a "suffering servant," a "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." The main argument runs as follows:

1. The principle ingredients in eudaimonistic human happiness or well-being, as John Wesley correctly identified them, are: a. love and obedience to the love commandments; b. spiritual beliefs, knowledge, experiences, dispositions, virtues, sensitivities, and activities; c. moral beliefs, knowledge, experiences, dispositions, virtues, sensitivities, and activities,

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<sup>4</sup>An expanded case for Wesley's eudaimonistic understanding of "happiness" is found in Rem B. Edwards, *John Wesley's Values—And Ours* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2013), 244-246.

<sup>5</sup>Wesley, "On Love," III, 4, *Works*, 4:386.

d. pleasures; enjoyments, joy, and e. freedom from as much pain, suffering, unhappiness, and loss as humanly possible. This may not be the whole story, but it will suffice for now.

1. Anyone who exemplifies these definitional components of happiness or well-being is indeed truly happy, at least to the extent and duration that these are present.

2. Jesus momentarily exemplified all of these components of happiness or well-being for most of his life, even if not during his passion and crucifixion.

3. Conclusion: Jesus was truly happy for most of his life.

The third point here makes no direct appeal to historical specifics about Jesus. Rather, it assumes that the four Gospels give us an accurate general knowledge of the overall *character* of Jesus during his life, ministry, and death. A common-sense understanding of human nature itself also supports some of the following characterizations of Jesus.

The first point above is the key to the argument and requires further explanation. Each theme below could be supported by many additional quotes from Wesley, but those given will suffice for present purposes.

According to Wesley, genuine human happiness or well-being consists in the following (and perhaps more).

#### **a. Love and Obedience to the Love Commandments**

Wesley thought that loving, in lived obedience to Jesus' two love commandments, is the most basic component of human happiness. Without love, no one can be happy. Christians are happy and joyful people because they are loving people,<sup>6</sup> Wesley affirmed. (We might want to add that non-Christians who are loving people are also happy and joyful.) Their happiness consists largely in loving God and their neighbors, but not in loving the mindless things of the world, as do worldly people. People can love the wrong things. Most do, he thought. True happiness depends as much on *who and what* we love as on *that* we love, but all who love God, other people, and animals<sup>7</sup> are happy people. As Wesley explained, "Does anyone imagine the love of our neighbor is misery, even the loving every man as our own soul? So far from it that next to the love of God this

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<sup>6</sup>Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:223-224.

Wesley scholars seem to neglect the great moral and religious significance that Wesley attached to animals. For an examination of Wesley's own radical Christian perspective on animals, see Edwards, *John Wesley's Values—And Ours*,

affords the greatest happiness of which we are capable.”<sup>8</sup> Loving not only fulfills our God-given essence or image, it also is downright enjoyable. Quoting another author, Wesley affirmed “The joy of loving, or of being loved.”<sup>9</sup> He recognized “the pleasure of loving” (in those words) as not springing from self-love or “advantage to” oneself.<sup>10</sup> No “reciprocal altruism” for Wesley! *Agape* isn’t long range self-interestedness.

In addition to being joyful or pleasant, unselfish love, *agape*, also renews and *fulfills* the most important, meaningful, and essential potentials of our God-given nature, of the image of God within us. Wesley had a very rich understanding of essential properties that make up the image of God within us. They consist in our being (1) *spirits* (immaterial souls) with (2) *self-motion*, (3) *understanding*, (4) *will* (desires, feelings, affections), and (5) *liberty* (free choice).<sup>11</sup> Under “will” he made a place for love as one of our essential image of God qualities. What theologian of consequence prior to Wesley, if any, ever affirmed that love is the image of God within us? (Almost all said, “reason.”) Wesley wrote, “But love is the very image of God: it is the brightness of his glory. By love man is not only made like God, but in some sense one with him.”<sup>12</sup> “Above all,” he wrote, “remembering that God is love, he [the Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor: of universal love.., .”<sup>13</sup>

As for the Jesus of the Gospels, would it really be too presumptuous to think that he was an intensely, constantly, and consistently loving person? He actually exemplified all the above image of God qualities. He was an embodied spirit capable of initiating his own movements and behaviors. He was capable of understanding and of increasing in knowledge and wisdom. He had a will, that is, all the normal desires, emotions, dispositions, and feelings that human beings usually have. He exercise

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<sup>8</sup>Wesley, “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3:189.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity” in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 185.

<sup>11</sup>Wesley, “The General Deliverance,” *Works*, 2:438-439. These features of the image of God are also discussed elsewhere, for example, Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” *Works*, 2:474-475; Wesley, “The Good Steward,” *Works*, 2:284-285; Wesley, “On the Fall of Man,” *Works*, 2:409-410; Wesley, “The New Birth,” *Works*, 2:188.

<sup>12</sup>Wesley, “The One Thing Needful,” *Works*, 4:355. See also “The Righteousness of Faith,” *Works*, 1:205.

<sup>13</sup>Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” 184.

responsible liberty or freedom of choice. Most especially, Jesus was a loving and caring person. Wesley's view was that love and service to others fulfill human nature, God's moral image, as well as the law, including the two love commandments, which proclaim "Thou O man of God, stand fast in love, in the image of God wherein thou art made."<sup>14</sup> The two love commandments are rock-bottom Christianity, Methodism, and "true religion."<sup>15</sup> The Jesus of the four Gospels actually obeyed the love commandments. He loved God most of all, himself as he loved others, and others as he loved himself. We have no good "historical" reasons for thinking otherwise. If so, as an intensely, constantly, and consistently loving person, Jesus was indeed an intensely, constantly, and consistently happy person. Given his understanding of the very nature of happiness, Wesley could have easily affirmed that Jesus was indeed a happily loving person, but there is more.

**b. Spiritual Beliefs, Knowledge, Experiences, Dispositions, Virtues, and Activities**

Without being naïve about the evils that befall us, Wesley was convinced that properly religious people are happy, and unreligious people are unhappy. Toward the end of his sermon on "The Important Question," Wesley concluded, "It has been proved . . . that religion is happiness, that wickedness is misery. . . ."<sup>16</sup> He rejected the idea that Christians must be miserable in this world so they can be happy in the next. The real options, he argued, are between unhappiness both here and hereafter, and happiness both here and hereafter. The important question is: "Will you be happy here and hereafter—in the world that now is, and in that which is to come? Or will you be miserable here and hereafter in time and in eternity?"<sup>17</sup>

Wesley advised, "Singly aim at God. . . . Pursue one thing: happiness in knowing, in loving, in serving God."<sup>18</sup> Further, "But true religion, or a heart right toward God and man, implies happiness as well as holiness."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Wesley, "The Righteousness of Faith," *Works*, 1:205.

<sup>15</sup>Wesley, "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," 184-185; Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 9:35, 37-38; Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:221-224.

<sup>16</sup>Wesley, "The Important Question," *Works*, 3:197.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:197.

<sup>18</sup>Wesley, "On Dissipation," *Works*, 3:123.

<sup>19</sup>Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Works*, 1:223.

Real Methodists are “happy in God, yea always happy. . . .”<sup>20</sup> Christians are more likely to live a happy life than non-Christians because spirituality is an essential happiness-making and pleasure-giving property, and over time truly religious people successfully actualize its potentials, with God’s help. They find both image of God fulfillment *and* pleasure in loving God plus every creature God has made. They take “pleasure in God.”<sup>21</sup> They heed Wesley’s advice: “One design ye are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and eternity.”<sup>22</sup>

Enduring happiness, Wesley argued, partly involves “the pleasures of religion,” specifically, pleasures derived from “the love of God, and of all mankind,” and from the more enduring joy, delight, comfort, peace, gratitude, and rejoicing that such love brings.<sup>23</sup> He regarded such pleasures as much more lasting and deeply satisfying than the fleeting pleasures of imagination and sensations. He called them “nobler enjoyments,” which are nobler than “low” sensory pleasures.<sup>24</sup>

The Jesus of the Gospels was unquestionably a profoundly spiritual or religious person. He was intensely open and attuned to God and obedient to God’s loving will. He completely identified himself with God, was truly “God-intoxicated,” and found both essence fulfillment and enjoyment in his own spiritual beliefs, knowledge, experiences, dispositions, sensitivities, virtues, and activities. According to Wesley,

Now, to love God, in the manner the Scripture describes, in the manner God himself requires of us, and by requiring engages to work in us, to love him as the one God; that is, “with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength.” It is to desire God alone for his own sake, and nothing else, but with reference to him; to rejoice in God; to delight in the Lord; not only to seek, but find happiness in him; to enjoy God as the chiefest among ten thousand; to rest in him as our God and our all—in a word, to have such a possession of God as makes us always happy.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” *Works*, 9:35.

<sup>21</sup>Wesley, “The More Excellent Way,” *Works*, 3:265.

<sup>22</sup>Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” *Works*, 1:408.

<sup>23</sup>Wesley, “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3:185.

<sup>24</sup>Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” 186; Wesley, “Spiritual Idolatry,” *Works*, 3:106; Wesley, “Original Sin,” *Works*, 2:180.

<sup>25</sup>Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, IX,” 5, *Works*, 1:635.

Though not written about him, wouldn't this be a good description, an accurate description, of Jesus himself, of his character, as portrayed in the Gospels? If so, Wesley could have concluded that Jesus was a profoundly happy person because he was profoundly spiritual in all such ways.

### **c. Moral Beliefs, Knowledge, Experiences, Dispositions,**

#### **Virtues, Sensitivities, and Activities**

Love is not the only moral/spiritual virtue that involves beliefs, knowledge, experiences, dispositions, sensitivities, and activities, but it is worthy of the special attention already given to it. Morality was not totally separated from spirituality in Wesley's mind, but there is more to morality than love alone. Love to God and all mankind is the "one, single ground" of all moral virtues,<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> their source or fount. But there are additional moral virtues, and actualizing and acting upon them is an essential part of both image of God fulfillment-happiness and pleasure-happiness. The *moral* imitation of God (and Jesus) looms large in Wesley's Christian ethics. Wesley's affirmed that the Christian "knows the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate him he worships, so he is continually laboring to transcribe into himself all his imitable perfections: in particular, his justice, mercy and truth, so eminently displayed in all his creatures."<sup>2</sup> God works, and we "labour" together with God toward actualizing all possible moral and spiritual virtues. We *strive* for all Christian perfections, for sanctification, for holiness, even if we succeed only by degrees, and only with God's help. In many writings, Wesley offered extended lists of moral virtues, but consider this one.

And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness; of humanity, courtesy and affability. It makes a Christian rejoice in the virtues of all, and bear a part in their happiness at the same time that he sympathizes with their pains and compassionates their infirmities. It creates modesty, condescension, prudence— together with calmness and evenness of temper. It is the parent of generosity, openness and frankness, void of jealousy and suspicion. It begets candor and willingness to believe and hope whatever is kind and friendly of every man, and invincibl

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<sup>26</sup>Wesley, "To the Inhabitants of Ireland," *Works*, 9:284.

<sup>27</sup>Wesley, "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity," 184.

patience, never overcome of evil, but overcoming evil with good. . . . The same love is productive of all right actions. ... It constrains him to do all possible good, of every possible kind, to all men; and makes him invariably resolved in every circumstance of life to do that, and that only, to others, which supposing he were himself in the same situation, he would desire they should do to him.<sup>28</sup>

As for the relevance of “doing good” and “being good” to happiness, Methodists teach “that there is an inseparable connection between virtue and happiness; that none but a virtuous (or, as they usually express it, a religious) man can be happy.”<sup>29</sup> Virtuous living is very enjoyable, as well as image of God fulfilling. “Now if the doing good [gives] so much pleasure to one who acted merely from natural generosity, how much more must it give to one who does it on a nobler principle, the joint love of God and his neighbor? It remains, that the doing all which religion requires will not lessen, but immensely increase our happiness.”<sup>30</sup> Once again, it “affords the greatest happiness of which we are capable.”<sup>31</sup>

Applied to the Jesus of the Gospels, Wesley’s account of the many moral virtues that flow from love seems to be accurately descriptive of his general character. Jesus highly, perhaps perfectly, exemplified all the moral virtues, and this is further evidence that he was a profoundly happy person. Wesley could have said that because of his exemplary ethical beliefs, virtues, motives, dispositions, sensitivities, and deeds, Jesus had “all the happiness of which [he was] capable.”

### c. Pleasures, Enjoyments, Joy

Wesley thought that Christians have a much better chance than non-Christians at both essence fulfillment and hedonic enjoyment. He was definitely not against “the pursuit of happiness.” He did not use this exact phrase, but he did write of “they that pursue happiness,”<sup>32</sup> and of “Pursuing happiness, but never overtaking it.”<sup>33</sup> Wesley was all for happiness, understood as composed in part of pleasures, but not pleasures alone. He repeatedly affirmed and never denied the goodness of pleasure as such.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 185.

<sup>29</sup>Wesley, “To the Inhabitants of Ireland,” *Works*, 9:283.

<sup>30</sup>Wesley, “The Important Question,” 3, *Works*, 3:191.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 189.

<sup>32</sup>Wesley, “On Mourning for the Dead,” *Works*, 4:239.

<sup>33</sup>Wesley, “Spiritual Idolatry,” *Works*, 3:100.

He wrote, “We no more affirm pleasure in general to be unlawful than eating and drinking.”<sup>34</sup> But, he thought, most people go about pursuing pleasure in the wrong way; worldly people live mainly to experience nothing more than the world and its sensory pleasures, or imaginary and social manifestations of them. He divided the pursuit of worldly pleasures into three groups, *pleasures of sense* (“the desires of the flesh”), *pleasures of the imagination* (“the desire of the eye”), and *pleasures of high social honor, class, or status* (“the pride of life”).<sup>35</sup> Obviously, much more could be said about each of these. Worldly persons live only for worldly pleasures, many intellectuals only for mental pleasures, but they do not live to enjoy or be enriched by grace, faith, spirituality, love, moral virtue, and “works of mercy.” To this theme he gave much attention.<sup>36</sup>

Wesley vigorously defended the importance of pleasure, but not exclusively or primarily the sensory pleasures of the world. One of his objections to the pursuit of “low,” worldly, sensual pleasures was that they are fleeting, transient, disappointing, and ultimately unsatisfying and unfulfilling. Said Wesley, “You cannot find your long-sought happiness in all the pleasures of the world . . . which may amuse, but cannot satisfy.”<sup>37</sup> Wesley did not say so, but one very serious problem with loving “mere things” is that they cannot love us back.

At times, Wesley may have underestimated the positive contributions of sensory enjoyments to a Christian’s, or anyone else’s, genuine happiness. After all, our senses and their objects were also created for us by God, as was sensory pleasure itself. Wesley’s most serious objection was actually to futile efforts to enjoy the world without God, or in the absence of God, i.e., without an awareness of God’s presence in sensory objects and processes, and of God’s expectations for us regarding them. He did not object to enjoying the world under or within God. Any Christian, he wrote, “may smell a flower, or eat a bunch of grapes, or take any other pleasure which does not lessen but increase his delight in God.”<sup>38</sup> Again, “The man who loves God feels that ‘God hath given him all things

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<sup>34</sup>Wesley, “Letter to Mr. Fleury,” *Works*, 9:393.

<sup>35</sup>Wesley discussed these in many writings. See, for example, Wesley, “Spiritual Idolatry,” *Works*, 3:105-111; Wesley, “An Israelite Indeed,” *Works*, 3:282-283; Wesley, “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3:183-185, 192-194; Wesley, “Tie Circumcision of the Heart,” *Works*, 1:409, and elsewhere.

<sup>36</sup>See Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours*, 90-104.

<sup>37</sup>Wesley, “Spiritual Worship,” *Works*, 3:101.

<sup>38</sup>Wesley, “The Reformation of Manners,” *Works*, 2:318.

richly to enjoy.’ He delights in his works, and surveys with joy all the creatures which God hath made. Love increases both the number of his delights, and the weight of them, a thousandfold. For in every creature he sees as in a glass the glory of the great Creator.”<sup>39</sup> Not viewing and experiencing all things in God, and God in all things, was what he called “practical atheism.” God’s omnipresence means that God pervades everything, is present everywhere, though most of us are insensitive to that.<sup>40</sup>

God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical Atheism; but, with a true magnificence of thought, survey heaven and earth, and all that is therein, as contained by God in the hollow of His hand, who by His intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is, in a true sense, the soul of the universe.<sup>41</sup>

Few people have seriously considered pleasure within the life and experience of Jesus. We have many words for experiencing pleasure—enjoyment, joy, having fun, etc. The Gospels may have neglected this, but we can ask; Did Jesus ever have any fun? Did he ever enjoy anything? Human nature itself may provide us with a good answer. If Jesus was as “fully human” as orthodoxy insists, surely he did. Since most children with loving parents are playful, inquisitive, venturesome, joyful, and affectionate, we can safely assume that Jesus had a happy childhood. The Gospels give us no reasons for thinking that he was not physically and mentally healthy, so we can safely assume that he regularly experienced all the ordinary human joys and exuberance of vibrant living. He enjoyed eating, drinking, and dining with outcasts and sinners. Perhaps he enjoyed defying the strict religious purity conventions of his day. As fully human, he had both mundane and sublime goals, achieved many of them, and gained countless satisfactions thereby.

Most of us take great joy (pleasure) and find great personal fulfillment in helping others, no matter how, and surely Jesus did as well. Most of us take great pleasure in actually loving both God and others intensely, and in acting accordingly. If he was fully human, Jesus must have done so as well. Most of us find much hedonic delight in humor and laughter.

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<sup>39</sup>Wesley, “The Love of God,” *Works*, 9:343.

<sup>40</sup>Wesley, “On the Omnipresence of God,” *Works*, 4:39-47.

<sup>41</sup> Wesley, “The Righteousness of Faith,” *Works*, 1:205.

Others have asked whether Jesus ever laughed or had a sense of humor, with some positive results. Wesley's view was that the key elements that *define* human happiness—love, spirituality, and morality—are both pleasant and image of God fulfilling. Jesus identified with God within himself and in others, and he had innumerable enjoyable and fulfilling identification experiences over the course of his lifetime. As fully human, Jesus experienced all of the interests, desires, emotions, and feelings that we all experience, and he knew both their satisfactions and their frustrations. As Wesley indicated, “Our blessed Lord himself had a will as a man; otherwise he had not been a man.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, it would not be sacrilegious or wrong-headed to affirm, on Wesleyan grounds, that Jesus himself found abundant image of God fulfillment and much delight or pleasure in doing what Jesus would do, thinking what Jesus would think, choosing what Jesus would choose, willing what Jesus would will, feeling what Jesus would feel, and loving who, what, and how Jesus would love.

**d. Freedom from as Much Pain, Suffering, Loss,  
and Unhappiness as Humanly Possible**

Wesley was convinced that a moral and spiritual life is, on the whole, a happy life, but that does not mean that it contains no pain, suffering, or unhappiness. Christian happiness is never pure or unmitigated bliss; it is always mixed with pain and suffering. Wesley acknowledged at least two ways in which good, moral, spiritual, loving people are likely to suffer, no matter what.

First, suffering, accidents, diseases, poverty, losses, and malicious deeds by wicked persons do afflict good people.<sup>43</sup> Wesley was not naive enough to think that being a Christian, a Methodist, or a loving person guarantees protection from all losses, temptations, harms, accidents, diseases, poverty, pain, suffering, and unhappiness. His was not a prosperity gospel. As he recognized, the Christian “may accidentally suffer loss, poverty, pain; but in all these things he is more than conqueror.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, even the life of love involves some inherent suffering. He acknowledged that loving people may suffer precisely because they are loving people. Christians do deny themselves and carry crosses.<sup>45</sup> He

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<sup>42</sup> Wesley, “The Repentance of Believers,” *Works*, 1:337.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, “Death and Deliverance,” *Works*, 4: 208-209; Wesley, “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations,” *Works*, 2:222-235.

Wesley, “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3:191.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, “Self-Denial,” *Works*, 2:238-252.

defined a “cross,” as “anything contrary to our will, anything displeasing to our nature.”<sup>46</sup> Overcoming worldliness (sacrificing or dethroning worldly desires and pleasures, delaying gratification, controlling our passions) is contrary to our unredeemed natural will; actually doing so may be very distressing, thus displeasing to some aspects of our basic human nature, at least temporarily.

More importantly, Wesley recognized with St. Paul that loving people are compassionate, which means that they bear one another’s burdens and suffer with those who suffer, while also rejoicing with those who rejoice. Suffering is an integral part of the very definition of “compassion.” A Christian will “rejoice in the virtues of all, and bear a part in their happiness at the same time that he sympathizes with their pains and compassionates their infirmities.”<sup>47</sup> He knew that “sympathizing sorrow,” includes pains of soul. “These are ‘tears that delight and sighs that waft to heaven.’”<sup>48</sup> Through the best and worst of times, the Christian “has learned to be content, to be easy, thankful, joyful, happy.”<sup>49</sup> Christians do carry crosses, bear one another’s burdens, console one another, and suffer with those who suffer. Like Christ, Christians (and all loving people who live up to the best light they have, we might add) are also suffering servants; yet, even in that, they find great and enduring happiness—both fulfillment and joy. The pleasures associated with compassion, love, gratitude, just dealings, and other virtues are not always pure. They are often mixed with pains of soul, but even these are an integral part of genuine happiness, genuine fulfillment of the image of God within us, for God suffers with those who suffer. Writing of “the Lord Jehovah,” Wesley proclaimed, “Trust in him who suffered a thousand times more than ever you can suffer. Hath he not all power in heaven and earth?”<sup>50</sup>

Wesley argued that loving people do avoid some varieties of suffering and pains of soul; they are spared the inherent misery that is normally a part of immoral vices, dispositions, and deeds. All moral vices or “vile affections” are inherently miserable, he insisted. “All unholy tempers are unhappy tempers. Ambition, covetousness, vanity, inordinate affection, malice, revengefulness, carry their own punishment with them, and

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 2:243.

<sup>47</sup>Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” 185.

<sup>48</sup>Wesley, “The Important Question,” III, *Works*, 3:191-192.

<sup>49</sup>Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” 1,11, 186.

<sup>50</sup>Wesley, “Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels,” *Works*, 4:167.

avenge themselves on the soul wherein they dwell.”<sup>51</sup> In this sense, vice is its own punishment. Wesley developed this theme in many ways and in many writings. He identified all of the following as miserable vices: anger, fretfulness, revenge, ill-will, malice, hatred, jealousy, revenge, envy, and “any other temper opposite to kindness.”<sup>52</sup> He may have underestimated the perverse, but mixed, pleasures that may also attend them.

Many of Wesley’s writings explain how true religion brings peace of soul that passes all understanding, assurance of God’s love and acceptance, an inner experience of God’s constant presence, a good conscience toward and before God, forgiveness and relief from guilt, and exemption from a great host of fears and spiritual and existential anxieties. Further exploring all of that here would take us far beyond the scope of this article.<sup>53</sup>

Yes, the Jesus of the Gospels suffered compassionately with those who suffered, wept for and with those who wept, and bore the weight of our burdens and sins. He internalized and responded with deep sensitivity and compassion to every sinner and sufferer, and to every harm, loss, and tragedy. He endured the agonies of his own passion and crucifixion and felt abandoned by God at the end. Yet, for most of his life, in his innocence he was free from the miseries and “tempers” of all the moral vices, he had his own peace of soul that passed all understanding, he lived with assurance of God’s presence, love, and acceptance, he had a good and clear conscience before God, he was guilt-free, and he was spared a great multitude of spiritual fears and existential disquietudes.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, with John Wesley’s help, we can now understand that and how the Jesus of the Gospels was indeed a very happy person for much if not most of his life. Within himself, he was as profoundly loving, spiritual, moral, and joyful, filled with delight in all of creation, and free from all the miseries of sinful dispositions and deeds. Anyone who is like him, who lives in imitation of him, would be fulfilled in both their humanity and their personal uniqueness. And they would be filled with joy unspeakable. Anyone like him, anyone who is Christlike, would have an abundant life, a happy life, on Wesley’s own grounds.

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<sup>51</sup> Wesley, “The Important Question,” *Works*, 3:194.

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, “On Love,” *Works*, 4:386; Wesley, “The New Birth,” *Works*, 2:195-196.

<sup>53</sup> All of these themes are much further developed in Edwards, *John Wesley’s Values—And Ours*.