

# Together for good

5 Bible studies to grow happiness  
and wellbeing in your community



**Community**  
**+ Support**  
**+ Wellbeing**  
**+ Mental health**  
**+ Your church**

It all adds up to

**Livability**

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# Welcome



We hear a lot these days about happiness. There are plenty of articles extolling the virtues of ways in which we can make our lives more happy and fulfilling. In popular writing, happiness is sometimes promoted as a formula, a series of steps to follow; yet most of us would recognise that satisfaction in life can't be reduced to something so simple. From a faith perspective, we might also question whether pursuing the topic of happiness is the best use of our time. We may associate the word with frivolity – something transient and 'fluffy' rather than deep and lasting spiritual life.

Nagging questions remain about where happiness fits into our world. On the one hand, the idea of happiness pervades our whole society – yet as Christians, we may feel that its value is marginal or dubious. On the other hand, many of us would also recognise the benefits of a happy life, since it makes us healthier and can impact others positively too.

We may wonder then, given all this, whether the Bible has anything to say on the subject. Is there anything to be learned from modern approaches to health and wellbeing? In turn, do we have something to offer to the wellbeing of our wider community?

Our inspiration for the title of the studies comes from Romans 8:28: 'And we know that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good' (NIV). We all have experiences of life that challenge us, yet we firmly believe in the goodness of God and the call to be in relationship with one another.

As we work through "Together for Good", we hope you'll discover that exploring happiness is a rich topic. As you reflect on different questions, we hope you find insights that help you and those around you grow in your own wellbeing.

Each study will focus on a specific theme, inviting you to reflect on your experience, draw from the Bible, and then consider your response – both individually and as a church. It's our hope that you will be refreshed by new perspectives offered here, and called into a deeper life together, for good.

# 1 Exploring happiness



**“A joyful heart is a good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22)**

The word “happiness” is used very widely in our own culture to describe a huge variety of experiences, from how we feel when enjoying our favourite drink, to the joy of rediscovering a long-lost relative, right through to finding ultimate meaning in faith or philosophy. Many of us can feel uncomfortable with the word “happiness.” For some it can feel superficial, or a contrast to the life of faith, which invites sacrificial service. In fact, the Bible has a lot to say about happiness, although the words it uses and the meanings they carry are not necessarily the same as ours today.

As we explore the topic, we will find it offers a vision of a happy life which is anything but superficial. In today’s study, we will explore what a happy view of life looks like that will be good for us all, whether in church or our wider community.

## Bible study

### John 10: 1-10 Abundant life

This is a well-known passage containing an amazing offer in v 10 – the offer of abundant life, or life to the full. We’re familiar with the words, but do we know what this life is exactly? Perhaps the best way of understanding it is to look at Jesus himself, since his claim was backed up by his life, words and actions.

### Questions:

- What does “abundant life” look like to you personally? What are your own experiences of abundance?
- What do Jesus’ life and actions tell us about abundant life?

Let's unpack that expression "abundant life" a little more. The Greek word for life here, zoe, refers to something deeper, broader and more substantial than other Greek terms for life. Jesus emphasises it further by linking it with eternal life. Eternal life is life that God himself lives, in which quality is more significant than quantity – it's so dynamic that it can't be destroyed – it goes on forever!

Our second word is "abundant." The Greek word means "over and above, more than necessary, surpassing". Today we might say, "over the top", meaning that there's so much more that it seems excessive.

We can often think that abundant life is a purely spiritual idea, but in fact it embraces all aspects of our lives, physical, mental, emotional, relational, social, communal and spiritual. Our bodies, our relationships, our world are important to God and he wants all of them to experience his life.

### Questions:

As you consider the following elements, what picture emerges of an abundant life?

- Physical
- Mental and emotional
- Relational and social/communal
- Spiritual

## Group exercise

### Take the time to think about what really makes you happy.

Ask people to write down those things that make them happy. Then record their responses on a flip chart. Notice the kinds of things that are mentioned.

- Can you group them into themes?
- Are there things missing? People often do not mention material things, but tend to focus on people, relationships and meaningful encounters.
- What does this exercise tell us about the important things in life that bring more fulfilment?

## Today's discoveries

There has been a substantial body of research undertaken over the past 20 years, uncovering ways in which we can grow our wellbeing. It turns out that genuinely happy people live healthier lives than others, with greater resilience, richer relationships and even stronger immune systems. This begs lots of questions, like "how do I become happier?" The answer to this depends on what we mean by that word, "happiness".

One leading psychologist, Martin Seligman, proposes three main categories of happiness:

- **Pleasure** – mostly derived from material things, from ice cream to smart phones, cars and clothes. We all find these things enjoyable, but they last for only a short time – pleasure is transient.

- **Engagement** – rather than simply consuming pleasures, we participate in activities that demand more from us e.g. jobs, hobbies or relationships. The satisfaction we experience through these things is more lasting than pleasure – we invest in something more substantial.
- **Meaning** – attachment to something or someone lying beyond me and mine. The focus moves from "What do I want?" towards "What is my life for – why am I on planet earth?"

## Exercise

Think of someone you admire (living or dead; known to you or not). What is it precisely that you respect and appreciate about them? Into which of Seligman's above three categories would that characteristic(s) fit best? Pleasure? Engagement? Meaning? What does this tell us about the differences between those categories?

## Bringing it together

In this session so far we've explored the phrase "abundant life", particularly illustrated through the life of Jesus. We've also seen that true "happiness" comprises more than a smiley face or a slice of cake. Using Seligman's framework, we can see that all of life experiences can be placed on a wide spectrum. Below, you will find a list of experiences; all might contribute to greater happiness yet are incredibly different:

- The first scoop of ice cream is the best – everything after that doesn't quite match up!
- Finding a breakthrough at work brings a great sense of achievement
- Scaling a mountain fills us with awe and wonder at creation
- Holding your grandchild in your arms uncovers unexpected feelings of joy and affection
- Helping someone who's suffering, to show them they are loved, puts the focus onto others
- Experiencing a life of faith in God brings hope and fulfilment

All these and more contribute to a life well-lived and there are many dimensions to a fully satisfying life. In the Gospels we find a Jesus who seemed to enjoy life to the full. He took the whole person seriously, with all its joys and sorrows, and not just the spiritual aspects. He was interested in bodily health, relational connections and community living, as well as spiritual meaning and purpose.

## Challenge

### You as an individual

- Think of your own life as a whole. Would you say that you are flourishing (experiencing abundant life) in each of Seligman's categories? For example, you might feel you have a very meaningful life, but have little time for pleasure. Or you spend a lot of time on having fun, but don't have a sense of meaning and purpose in life.
- What do you think are the most important goals in life, and is there a better word than happiness to describe them?

## Your church community

- Which of Seligman's categories most describe life in your church community? Is there any imbalance? What might you increase (or diminish) to bring more abundant life?

## Meditation

Take the time to set up this exercise, rather than just jumping into it.

- Start by explaining what you're going to do – take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us.
- Encourage people to sit comfortably and close their eyes.

Take a few minutes to reflect on a time when you experienced contentment and peacefulness.

- Where were you?
- What was going on?
- Were you alone, or were others there? If so, what was their contribution to the positive experience?
- What was your contribution?
- Did the experience have a lasting effect on you? If so, what was that?
- Were you a Christian at the time? If so, what difference did that make?
- Where was God in that moment, and what was his contribution?

Sometimes this kind of experience is called an anchor memory – something to which you can return in your mind whenever you feel troubled, and use to bring consolation and security.

Why not use this anchor to help you the next time you experience distress or discomfort? The Bible speaks of our hope in God as a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19)

## Closing prayer

Lord, thank you for all the gifts you have given me.

The world with its beauty and resources.

Humanity, with its diversity and life.

My family, community, with its warmth and hope.

My life, with all the potential in it.

Jesus, embrace me and all I am.

# 2 Keys to success



**"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33)**

More often than not, our culture describes success in material terms. What do successful people look like? Well, surely, they must be wealthy high-achievers – professionally, commercially or academically – with plenty of fame, status and reputation thrown in.

But is that what true success is all about? Viktor Frankl spent three years in a Nazi death camp and afterwards wrote a best-selling book, "Man's search for meaning". In it he wrote, "Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself." His view of success looks very different from that promoted by many today.

We all have a complex relationship with the notion of success, whether in ourselves or others' lives. Some of our perspectives are healthy; others carry the distortions and disappointments of life's experiences. One way forward is to separate out external from internal views of success. The external is often associated with material measures, or society's assessments; whereas internal or intrinsic valuations use very different criteria.

What does the Bible say about success? To help us, we will look at the life of one Bible character, Joseph. He experienced both success and disaster.

## Bible study

### Gen 45:1-15 The life of Joseph

Joseph came from a highly dysfunctional family, where insecurity, favouritism and jealousy were rife. He was his father's favourite, which provoked his brothers to envy and hostility. Their murderous response, selling him into slavery, had long-lasting consequences. But this was just the beginning of Joseph's problems, as his attempts to live with integrity were rewarded with injustice and years of confinement.

Joseph finally found favour in Egypt – to such an extent that he was promoted to the post of prime minister. He married into the aristocracy and was given wealth and power. When finally his brothers came to Egypt, they found themselves face to face with Joseph, and with the consequences of their actions.

In v 4-15 he finally makes himself known to them. He has learnt a lot, it seems (v 5-8) – about himself, his family and God.

- What does 45:1-2 tell us about Joseph's attitudes to his brothers, after all the pain and suffering?
- What had Joseph learnt about God (45:5-8)?
- Why is it important to "remember the dreams" we have dreamed years before (42:9)?
- What does all this teach us about what true success looks like – and how we can embrace it?

## For reflection

Your own experience may be less dramatic than Joseph's, but we all have highs and lows in life. So think back over your life. What have been the successes? What have been the lows? Can you see God's hand at work in them? Could you agree with Paul's words in Phil 4:11-13?

## Learning: The impact of materialism on our everyday lives

We are surrounded every day with messages about "the good life" and what is necessary to achieve it. Most of these "necessities" are material – "the goods life" as someone has called it. But there are consequences of materialism, especially for our relationships and our sense of meaning and purpose in life. As Christians we may consider our perspective to be very different; but the narrative of "the goods life" is so pervasive – can we really say that we are immune from its impact?

## Materialism - the research

Much research has been carried out into how materialistic attitudes and values influence our thinking and behaviour. One person in particular has unearthed significant findings and conclusions, psychology professor Tim Kasser. He has shown that people who put most emphasis on image, status, money-making and accumulating possessions experience less happiness and satisfaction in life. On the contrary, levels of depression, anxiety and substance abuse are higher. Such people tend to treat others in more competitive, manipulative and selfish ways – they are less generous, empathetic and cooperative.

There seems to be a see-saw relationship between materialistic values on the one hand and people-orientated attitudes on the other. As one goes up, the other goes down. When people focus on image, status and "stuff", their concern for other people and for the environment around them falls away.

## **So why do we do it?**

Kasser offers two key factors:

1. Our culture embraces a particular narrative – pursue health, wealth and happiness-as-pleasure and all will be well.
2. On a deeper level, when we feel insecure and anxious about our lives, society or the world at large, we tend to seek comfort and solace in material things.

## **Finding a better way**

From Kasser's research and our own experience, two principles emerge:

1. External motives, rewards and measures of material success such as money, possessions and other material gains bring limited satisfaction, which fades over time and ultimately frustrates.
2. Intrinsic motivations (motives that come from within), focusing on personal development, relationships and a contribution to the wider community are more demanding, but much more likely to bring enduring satisfaction.

## **Bringing it together**

Many factors contribute to our sense of security and self-esteem, but perhaps two stand out. I need to know who I am in myself (secure and worthy of love); I also need to know what I can do (an ability to achieve and overcome obstacles in my path). We are all "being" and "doing" people. But we develop security and confidence from external factors too, whether people or things. Today, much emphasis is placed on material things to give us esteem and value. We also look to our career or standing in society to give us status, significance and prestige.

In a culture that seems to be obsessed with such matters as status, success and stuff, what is the best way for Christians to think and act? Think again about how Joseph experienced both disappointment and success.

- What were his challenges and temptations in prison?
- What different challenges and temptations did he face as prime minister?
- What are the equivalents for us today?

## **Challenge**

### **You as an individual**

- As Christians, we often place an emphasis on personal morality but are perhaps less aware of the impact of other things in our lives, such as materialism or status-seeking. What is your experience?
- What feels most challenging to you in maintaining a healthy sense of security and value?

### **Your church community**

- What are the measures of success for your church? Is the emphasis on quantity - numbers of people, financial reserves, breadth of facilities - and/or on quality - of relationships, community and connection with others?
- If you were to pick one area to develop in your life together, as a group or as a church, what would it be?

## Meditation

Take the time to set up this exercise, rather than just jumping into it.

- Start by explaining what you're going to do – take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us.
- Encourage people to sit comfortably and close their eyes.

Think about a time when you experienced success. It need not necessarily be academic or work success – it could for example have been to do with a relationship or community living.

- What was going on?
- How did you feel?
- Who else was involved (if any) – what was their contribution to your success?
- What was your contribution?
- Did that success have any lasting result in your life? Are you living in the good of it now?

Now think of a time when you experienced a setback.

- How did that feel?
- How might what you have learnt today about Joseph be of help to you?
- How might those feelings and that experience be of help to someone you know going through difficulties currently?

## Closing prayer

Thank you Lord that you have our lives in your hand.

Thank you that you still love us even when we misplace our trust.

Thank you that you are still with us when our circumstances seem to turn against us.

Thank you that you will always receive us when we turn to you.

And thank you that your acceptance of us does not depend on our performance.

Amen.

# 3 Richer relationships



**"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35)**

There's nothing in the world quite like relationships. Nothing compares with the joy and satisfaction we experience when they go well. On the other hand, some of the greatest pain on earth arises from broken and bitter relationships, whether personal, familial or national. Research has shown conclusively that healthy relationships are the most important factor by far in bringing about happiness and life satisfaction. Remember the exercise we tried out in Session 1, "What makes you happy"? Top of the list are always friendships, family and engagement with people.

Let's take a look at a well-known biblical passage on love – 1 Corinthians 13.

## Bible study

### 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (The Way of Love)

This passage is often read out publicly at weddings, holding up an ideal to which the newly married couple are exhorted to aspire. That is either hugely inspiring or massively intimidating, depending on which way you take it!

But what did Paul have in mind, when he first penned those famous words? Remember, he was writing to a Christian community that was wrestling with major problems, including immorality and pagan engulfment. Corinth was a port city, with all the moral and cultural issues found in such a place. But his greatest concern was for their relationships, as rival groups competed with each other, provoking pain and fragmentation. To such a troubled extended family, Paul presents an impressive vision of a people in community harmony.

Read through the passage two or three times, to get a good sense of its flow and emphasis.

- What strikes you most as you read the words?
- In v 4-6, Paul lists seven things that love is not (envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, insisting on its own way, irritable, resentful). What is so destructive about these attitudes, and how might we guard against them?

- In the same verses he also lists seven things that love is (patient, kind, rejoicing at the truth, bearing, believing, hoping, enduring). Do you know anyone who exemplifies such positive ways? What is attractive about that?

Paul's vision of healthy community life gives us an inspiring target. Of course, community living always involves many kinds of joys and sorrows, highs and lows.

- Applying Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, what joys and sorrows have you experienced/do you experience now in your church community?

(Leader: it may be helpful at this point to acknowledge that these issues affect us all. Embracing and committing to community life requires vulnerability, openness and humility).

## Learning

### Why are relationships so crucial to our wellbeing?

There are many studies that show the value of healthy relationships. Here is a summary, from Relate, the charity that offers help and support for relationships:

The evidence is now indisputable: good quality relationships do not only give our lives meaning; they are also critical to our wellbeing and impact on a vast array of outcomes, including parenting, educational attainment, child and adult mental health and wellbeing, quality of life for people in later life, and even preventing crime and anti-social behaviour. Our capacity for forming and maintaining relationships directly impacts on our ability to achieve things we value – being healthy, being happy, having self-respect, having a good job, being safe<sup>1</sup>.

One nine-year study found that the most isolated people are three times more likely to die during the study than those with strong relational connections. Even if you have bad health habits but maintain strong social ties, you live significantly longer than people who have great health habits but are isolated. One expert notes that if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, "you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half."

The remarkable Grant study has focussed on men's relationships over 80 years. Men who report being closer to their family, friends or community tend to be happier and healthier than others. George Valliant, who led the study, summarises its main conclusion succinctly: "The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people. Happiness equals love – full stop."

#### Questions:

- What do these research findings invite us to do in our church community?
- How do they help us to decide our approach as Christians to our neighbours?

## Bringing it together

The delights and woes of relationships are as real and meaningful today as in Paul's day. The main issues have not changed in 2000 years, so perhaps we should keep some key points in mind in all our relationships:

- We all bring our past experiences into our present relationships
- We are all different, whether we are young or old, extrovert or introvert, activist or contemplative

<sup>1</sup> Relate, "Altogether now: Stronger relationships for a stronger society", page 5 [https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-all\\_together\\_now-2025\\_vision\\_report.pdf](https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication-all_together_now-2025_vision_report.pdf)

- Living and being with others is always a mixed bag of joy and sorrow, highs and lows
- Success in relationships depends in large measure on our willingness to take responsibility for our attitudes and actions
- There is a challenge in being vulnerable to other people – the more open and vulnerable I am willing to be, the more people are likely to trust and respond to me, yet it comes with risks attached
- There is no substitute for healthy relationships – they are the basis for fruitful living

## Challenge

### You as an individual

- Spend some time reflecting on your past experiences, especially of relationships. How have they moulded you into the person you are now? What well-worn pathways do you follow in relationships – and is there scope to change?
- Have you benefited from someone else's willingness to love and accept you? What was the result?
- Over the next year, what could be your best contribution to healthy church relationships?

### Your church community

- What marks your church out as different in the way people treat each other?
- How might you grow as a church community in a way that both honours and respects one other, yet also maintains a high level of reality about pains and struggles?

## Meditation

Take the time to set up this exercise, rather than just jumping into it.

- Start by explaining what you're going to do – take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us.
- Encourage people to sit comfortably and close their eyes.

Thinking of your relationships throughout your life, to whom have you been closest?

- What was it about that person that makes them so special to you?
- How did they treat you?
- What words would best describe their character?
- How does such a person reflect the character of God?
- How might you become more like that yourself?
- Who would benefit from such a change? How?

## Closing prayer

Oh God, we need you.

We need you in our lives and our relationships.

We need you when we just can't cope with that person in the office, in the family, in the school.

Teach us to value each person we meet.

And treat them as you would treat them.

Forgive us our trespasses.

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Amen.

# 4 Creating community



**“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26)**

We humans are social beings – it's one of our most fundamental characteristics. Four hundred years ago, John Donne wrote those famous words, “No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of a continent, a part of the main”, and they are just as relevant today.

The Bible too has much to say about corporate relationships, or community. From the beginning, “God said, ‘It is not satisfactory for man to be alone; I will make him a helper complementary to him’” (Genesis 2:18). Indeed, God himself is a community of persons, the Trinity, who created humans in his own image (“Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness”, Genesis 1:26). Jesus gathered a group of people together his twelve disciples, with others, to be the prototype of his new community. So we are on very solid ground when our focus is not simply on an individual Christian’s relationship with God, but also on the shared, communal dimension of our life together – the church.

Let’s look at that in more detail, in a classic passage on the church in the New Testament.

## Bible study

### Being the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12)

In the last session we looked at the vital importance of relationships and why we need to grow in them. In this session we will widen our perspective to the life of the community itself.

How should we best understand the church, and how it functions? The apostle Paul tells us it is like a human body, but how is that so?

#### Question:

Why did Paul use the body as a metaphor of the church? What are the similarities, and how does the human body's functioning illustrate our community relationships?

Some key points emerge from the passage:

1. Like constituent parts of a body, we are all very diverse, as individuals and as groups, each with our own special gifts and abilities (v 4-10)
2. But we are nevertheless members of just one body, not many (v 12-13)
3. There is only one head, one Lord, one Spirit, not several (v 4-6)
4. Each individual member is valuable – including those less visible (v 15-25)
5. The relationships are so closely connected and integrated that if just one person suffers (or rejoices), it has an immediate and profound effect on all the others (v 26). Think how a person feels when they have a toothache!

**Questions:**

- What examples of Paul's teaching can you think of in your experience of church community life?
- How much of this applies to our relationships with people outside the church – for example, people in your local community?

## **Learning: The crucial value of community**

Human beings function best in groups – they were never designed to live alone. This propensity to band together and cooperate is instinctive, hard-wired into our DNA. We've seen in the last session how the strength or weakness of our relationships, both individually and corporately, has a huge impact on our physical, mental and general health. But as a society we are not doing well with community relationships. Loneliness is becoming a huge problem.

One study showed that two-thirds of Britons say they have no one to speak to about mental health or relationships. Five million people say that the television is their main form of company. Mother Teresa expressed the matter succinctly: "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. There's a hunger for love."

In their study of human society, sociologists call the ties that bind people together in communities, social capital. If a neighbourhood has high social capital there is much connection, trust and cohesion. Two types of social capital are described. The first is all about bonding – tightly-knit groups who look, think and act like each other (family, friends, colleagues and ethnic groups function in this way). However, generally speaking, there is less interest and welcome for people who are different. The second type of social capital is termed bridging. Here, people from one group reach out to another group that is very different. This is much more challenging, but it provides the opportunity to break down age-old barriers and bring new and fresh life to groups that hitherto had no interest in each other.

**Questions:**

- What causes a community to turn in on itself, to focus only on bonding, with no interest in bridging to other, different groups?
- Conversely, what might help such a community to turn its attention outwards?
- What groups exist in your locality that have little or no contact with your church? How might you as a church begin to make contact with them?

## **Bringing it together**

**"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)**

Recently, the Christians in Practice project looked into the link between Christians' engagement with their local communities and its impact on their own faith. The results were very revealing:

- 82% said that helping others in their community had helped them grow as a Christian
- 83% reported that it had increased their love for other people
- 77% affirmed that it had increased their love for God
- 72% agreed that it had helped them to understand their faith better

Our passage in 1 Corinthians 12 shows how a group of people can develop bonding social capital, through healthy, generous, committed relationships. The Christians in Practice project demonstrates how outward-looking groups can extend bridging social capital, to the benefit of both givers and recipients.

Yet many churches struggle with both internal and external relationships. With busy and sometimes stressful lives and many conflicting commitments, many church members feel unable to engage with others in their church – let alone people in their neighbourhoods. The quality of our church community suffers and we are left wondering what to do.

### **One town shows the way: compassionate Frome**

How did one Somerset town bring about a 17% fall in hospital admissions, whilst the whole county at that time saw a 29% rise? Simply put, it was because a local GP decided to take action on the dual challenge of over-medicalisation and increasing loneliness of her patients. How did she do it? By promoting and developing relational connections and community locally. She began to employ "health connectors" within the NHS to help people plan their care, but also recruited "community connectors" – volunteers who helped them find support. The result was that local people, rather than possessing symptoms of disease, discovered capacity to address their own problems.

#### **Question:**

How might this example help you as a church community engage more effectively with your locality?

## **Challenge**

### **You as an individual**

- What are the barriers that prevent you opening up to others in your church community?
- What might help you to grow your relationships within that community, to nurture greater bonding

## Your church community

- Looking again at our passage (1 Corinthians 12), where would you see your church's strengths?
- Research shows that community connection and support is one of the church's strongest cards. So how might your church strengthen its own community life?
- Could you extend this beyond the walls of the church, to people who would never normally darken the door of their local church (ie grow bridging social capital)?

## Meditation

Take the time to set up this exercise, rather than just jumping into it.

- Start by explaining what you're going to do – take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us.
- Encourage people to sit comfortably and close their eyes.

Reflect on your experience of church community over the past years.

- What was your best experience of church community?
- Who was part of that community?
- How did their words and actions contribute to the wellbeing of the community?
- What was your part in it?
- What did you learn then that would help you today?

## Closing prayer

Father God, I thank you that you know what community is like.

For you are a community of persons,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Give us your heart for community on earth.

For love, compassion and concern for each other.

And for others who lie beyond our own church family.

Amen.

# 5 Finding meaning



**“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)**

Topics such as happiness and success conjure up very tangible images in our minds – a glass of wine, pleasant feelings, beautiful scenery, coupled with popularity, fame, money or possessions. Not difficult to picture. Talk of relationships too evokes memories of people and contexts we know and remember well. But when we reflect on meaning and purpose in our lives, it’s a little more challenging to comprehend what is involved. Ask people to tell us about what makes them happy, and there are plenty of responses. Ask again what gives them meaning in life and the list tapers off after a few replies.

So, can the Bible help us uncover those hidden depths of meaning – especially the meaning of life? Let’s turn to the story of Israel in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah.

## Bible study

### **Jeremiah 29:1-14 Finding hope and meaning in sorrow**

The prophecy of Jeremiah was written during a time of profound crisis in Israel’s history, 600 years before Christ. The whole nation was being overrun by the superpower of the day, Babylon, and the leaders of the realm, with many of its people, were carried off to death and slavery in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, with the land left in ruins for seventy years, until a few pioneers began to return to commence the huge task of rebuilding. Many of the survivors must have asked some pretty basic questions about the love of God and whether he really had their interests at heart.

It was into this catastrophic situation that Jeremiah prophesied, with a message of hope and a promise of future recovery. He spoke of welfare now and an assurance of restoration to come. But if you were one of the Jewish exiles in Babylon at the time, I wonder how you might have felt?

- In particular, how might you have responded to v 5-7, where God encouraged his people to settle down in the capital of their oppressors, make homes there, and most difficult of all, pray for the very people who brought them there in the first place?
- How could all this apply to our situation today? Is there anything for us to learn?
- How do we respond as Christians to grief, disappointment and misfortune?

## What kind of welfare?

One of the key words in the passage is translated into English as "welfare" or "peace" in v 7 and in v 11). It is the word shalom, which is usually understood to mean "peace". However, shalom has a much deeper and richer meaning than the absence of external conflict, or the presence of inner tranquillity. It is best rendered "wholeness" or "completeness", a situation in which all dimensions of life are as they should be, whether in personal health and wellbeing, interpersonal harmony or even national or international accord (at heart it is a relational word). In fact, biblically speaking, it extends to the whole created order, including the cosmos. In the New Testament the equivalent word is eirene, which when applied to Jesus, refers to his achievements through the Cross and resurrection. Ultimately all things will be brought together in him (Colossians 1:20). So to speak of shalom or eirene is to encompass every dimension of human life, not just the "spiritual" parts! God wants to bring about our welfare – even in the most calamitous situations (as in Jeremiah 29).

Notice in v 11 that finding "a future and a hope" is tied to God's "plans for shalom and not for evil."

- What kind of future and hope would arise out of shalom in your local community?
- In Luke 10:6 Jesus refers to a "man of shalom/eirene" – someone in the local community who is open to God's people and message and is willing to welcome others into their home. Do you know such people in your context? What might be the consequence of developing a connection with them?

Verse 7 reads, "Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom."

- How do you now understand v 7, in the light of what we have explored concerning that word shalom?
- If God was telling his people to "build houses, take wives and multiply there", what does that tell us about his intention for his people in contexts where they do not feel at home or at ease?
- What does all this mean for us today? How do we "seek the welfare" of the place "where he has sent us"? How do we "find our welfare" in its welfare?

## Reviewing our learning so far

We have covered a lot of ground in the course so far, examining notions of happiness and success, and seeking to re-interpret them in the light of what the Bible says about abundant life and true success and security. We have explored its teaching on relationships and community, welcoming its inspiration and challenge to both grow internal community bonding and also bridge the gap to others who are different from ourselves.

Now we want to take stock, draw the strands together and come to some conclusions, especially regarding meaning and purpose in life.

## Exercise: reviewing the first four sessions

Spend some time looking again at what we have examined over the past four sessions. Don't feel you have to consider it all, but rather select one piece of learning, reflection or conclusion that has struck you most – one for each session:

1. The most striking conclusion from Session 1: Exploring Happiness for me was...

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2. For Session 2: Keys to Success, it was...

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3. For Session 3: Richer Relationships it was...

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4. For Session 4: Creating Community it was...

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Do any of these conclusions link with each other? Do any themes emerge? What difference might all this make to your life as you move forward, both personally and as part of your church community?

### Living in shalom

Life is not always a bed of roses – pain and suffering accompany us, as well as joy and delight. Our passage in Jeremiah 29 illustrates this only too clearly, as God's people struggled with grief, loss and disappointment. And yet the same passage boldly asserts that even in our darkest moments, we can find hope and welfare. This may not always be expressed through material wellbeing, but shalom speaks of much more than health and wealth.

In Session 1 we discovered that abundant life can be experienced in many and varied spheres of life, including the physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Jesus certainly exemplified this wholistic perspective, bringing shalom to many people in all these areas. Even as he anticipated the pain and suffering he was to endure on the Cross, he was still able to say to his followers, "My shalom/eirene I leave with you, I give to you" (John 14:27). He expected his people (both then and now) to experience and release that shalom into their relationships, communities and society. After all, he is the Prince of Shalom!

So how do we bring this shalom to each other and to the world around us? Perhaps our reading of Jeremiah 29, as well as our experience of the Cross of Jesus, helps us to recognise that the abundant life Jesus spoke of is experienced as much in our difficult and dark times as in the easy, fun times. Finding joy in the midst of pain is one of the keys to a successful Christian life. And this may well be the source and route through which God will bring his life, his shalom to others. As theologian and writer Frederick Buechner puts it, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

We are called by God to be active agents of cooperation with him in his re-creation of his world. That's a high calling and we need as much capacity as we can get to see it happen! God has promised his Holy Spirit to provide those resources. But this is not simply an individual pursuit – it happens primarily in community, just as it did when the church began, on the Day of Pentecost.

## **Challenge**

### **You as an individual**

- Applying Buechner's words to your life, what would you say your greatest joy- your deep gladness is? How might its encounter with the world's need (i.e. that of the people around you) become your vocation?
- What one thing, above anything else, will you take away from this course?
- If someone were to ask you what the meaning of your life is, what would you say?

### **Your church community**

- How might you apply Buechner's challenge to your church community? What would you say its greatest joy is, and how might this translate into its main vocation?
- What difference would it make to your local community if your church community suddenly disappeared overnight? How can you develop those key contributions over the next year?

## **Meditation**

Take the time to set up this exercise, rather than just jumping into it.

- Start by explaining what you're going to do – take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us.
- Encourage people to sit comfortably and close their eyes.

Spend some minutes meditating on the verse from Jeremiah that we examined earlier:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

- What kind of plans might God have for you in the days and years ahead?
- What parts of your life might God want to bring "welfare" to (e.g. physical, mental, spiritual, etc)?
- Invite God into both your hopes and fears for the future

Looking at verse 7, think about other people you know (especially non-Christians).

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

## **Closing prayer**

Lord, you call each one of us to be known and loved.

You created us to live life in all its fullness.

As we think on our lives-

All that we receive as a gift,

All that we struggle with,

Draw us to our deepest gladness.

As we seek to live lives that bring joy to you.

And hope to other people.

Amen.

# Your next steps

If you would like to help your church grow wellbeing in your community, why not go deep with Livability's Happiness Course?

## What is The Happiness Course?

The Happiness Course was developed by Livability to support churches in having meaningful conversations about happiness and wellbeing - developing new relationships with those in their community.

The course explores important life questions and practical steps to take that enhance life outcomes, wellbeing and community connections.

Livability trains people to become course leaders to adapt it to their context and run the course in their community.

## What does the course cover?

The course starts by asking the simple question, "What makes you happy?" It then examines four different kinds of happiness: pleasure, success, relationships and meaning.

Run over four sessions, the course will help you to talk about life experiences, examine what science tells us about happiness and wellbeing, and explore practical tools that you can use during the week.

## The importance of wellbeing

Wellbeing is a concept that appears on government agendas and is a word we've become quite familiar with. We are seeing traditional indicators of happiness such as employment or school league tables only go so far when it comes to measuring how happy people feel about their lives. Depression is fast becoming one of the most significant medical issues of our times and loneliness is reaching epidemic proportions.

## Who is the course for?

The great thing about happiness is that all of us, whatever our background or faith, are on the same journey. We can all learn how to live more fulfilled lives.

### What have people said about the course?

*'The course has hugely impacted individuals who attended. Many people came with huge hurts and issues e.g. long-term clinical depression, relationship breakdown, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem. Over the four weeks the group really bonded and shared deeply. I had the privilege of seeing and hearing change take place through the course.'*

*'I have been amazed at the depth of sharing in the conversations afterwards.'*

## About Livability

Livability is the disability charity that connects people with their communities.

Through a wide range of disability, education, training and community services, we promote inclusion and wellbeing for all.

Together, we work to see people take part, contribute and be valued. We put the elements in place that all add up to connected lives and communities.

## About the authors of Together for Good

Together for Good was written by Dr Andrew Parnham with Corin Pilling.

Andrew Parnham is the author of Lasting Happiness: In search of deeper meaning and fulfillment (Darton, Longman, & Todd 2018).

Corin Pilling is the Assistant Director of Community Engagement at Livability.

**To get your electronic copy of Together for Good visit:**  
[www.livability.org.uk/togetherforgood](http://www.livability.org.uk/togetherforgood)

## About training and The Happiness Course

Livability can deliver training to groups across the UK. For more information or to have a conversation about Happiness training contact us today:

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**It all adds up to**

**Livability**

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With thanks to Nancy Honey for some photos featured.

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