

Lord,
I Just
Want
to Be
Happy

Leslie Vernick



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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LORD, I JUST WANT TO BE HAPPY

Copyright © 2009 by Leslie Vernick

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vernick, Leslie.

Lord, I just want to be happy / Leslie Vernick.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-7369-1923-4 (pbk.)

1. Happiness—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4647.J68V475 2009

248.4—dc22

2009024274

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Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 / DP-NI / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

God Has Designed You for Happiness.	9
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Part One: Understanding Our Unhappiness

1. Stories and Scripts	21
2. Elephants Out of Control.	39
3. Stuck in the Pit.	57
4. Recalculating	79

Part Two: Moving Beyond Our Unhappiness

5. A New Way of Seeing.	99
6. Fall in Love.	119
7. A Beautiful You	137
8. Training Elephants and Human Hearts.	155

Part Three: Practicing Happiness

9. The Intentional Life	177
10. Making Lemonade.	197
11. Giving Thanks Is Not Just for Thanksgiving. . .	211
A Few Final Thoughts	227
Notes	229

Stories and Scripts

Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.

EPICETUS 2

Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is a little like expecting a bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian.

DENNIS WHOLEY

JANET CAME INTO MY OFFICE UPSET, anxious to share her latest litany of what was wrong with her life. Her friend Dana hadn't invited her over last Sunday like Janet had hoped she would, and Janet felt hurt and rejected. Over the course of our counseling, I had learned that most of Janet's friends didn't support or love her as faithfully as she wished they would. She hated that she wasn't pretty enough, thin enough, or popular enough to gain the attention from others that she craved. Her job didn't satisfy her, nor did it pay enough, and the people there weren't very friendly either.

Janet's mother also irritated her. She described her mom as too busy living her own life to care that her daughter was a single mom and often needed help with her kids. That prompted me to ask Janet about her church family. She said she didn't get anything out of the

sermons and no one from the Bible study ever invited her out to lunch—so why bother?

Janet wasn't clinically depressed, but she was miserable with herself, with others, and with life. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Nothing was ever the way she wanted it to be, or the way it should be. "I just want to be happy," she moaned. "Why can't God make it easier for me? I hate that life is so hard, so unfair."

Perhaps your situation isn't as extreme as Janet's, but I think many of us can relate to her feelings. Life *does* disappoint us at times. Others don't give us the love or attention we want or expect, and as a result we feel angry, hurt, gypped, and sad. We hate that we're not perfect or popular or powerful or pretty enough to feel confident or attractive or worthy. Jesus' promise of an abundant life seems hollow. We get stuck living in a mind-set of, *If only I were more _____ or had more _____, then I'd be happy.* Or we tell ourselves, *If only _____ would change, then I could be happier.*

Take a minute and fill in the blanks for yourself. What might you put in? During one session, Janet said, "If only I were more popular and could lose ten pounds, then I'd be happy." At another session, she said something different: "If only my mother would change and help me out more with my kids, then I'd be happier."

What about you? Perhaps you tell yourself you'd be happy if only you were more beautiful, talented, or intelligent. Others say they'd be happy if only they had more money, more time, or more energy. You might believe you'd be happier if only you were married instead of single, or married to a different person instead of the one you're married to. Or maybe you'd rather not be married at all. Still others think that if only they had a baby, or better-behaved children, or a more attentive spouse, or a more prestigious or powerful job, or a bigger house, *then* they'd finally be happy.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for making changes when possible and appropriate. But I've discovered in my own life, as well as in the lives of people I've worked with, that much of our misery is caused by

the stories we tell ourselves about how things *should* be...rather than what actually is.

Unrealistic Expectations

Janet told herself that her unhappiness resulted from not being good enough, thin enough, or pretty enough. She was unhappy because she didn't make enough money, because people let her down, and because her life was unfair.

But those things weren't the true source of her suffering. Janet's misery was much more a result of her unrealistic expectations of herself, life, and others than of her actual life situations. Although she wasn't aware of it, Janet lived her life out of a mind-set, or way of thinking, that was largely false. She created an internal story line of how things *should* go—and when they didn't go the way she thought they should, she felt sorry for herself. For example, she believed life should be easy and fair. When life was hard, she found it impossible to handle her disappointment without falling into self-pity because, after all, life shouldn't be so hard.

Janet also told herself that people should be nicer to her and that they should be more willing to give of their time and efforts to help her out. She wasn't aware she did it, but she also scripted out what other people should say, how they should say it, and what they should do for her, especially if they claimed to be Christians. When they failed to follow her script, she felt hurt, disappointed, and angry with them. Not only that, but she also clung to those negative feelings for days, nursing more resentment and hurt.

But perhaps the biggest source of Janet's unhappiness was her own unrealistic view of herself. She regularly dwelled on her flaws and weaknesses and imagined that others did too. She fantasized she'd be more desirable, lovable, and popular if only she were thinner and more attractive.

In order for Janet to change and experience true happiness, she

needs to become aware of the story line and scripts she has made up about herself, life, and others. Then she needs to reevaluate them according to what God says is true, good, and right. In addition, she must learn to handle the painful emotions that come with losses and disappointments in a different way, without falling into her habits of self-pity, resentment, or self-hatred.

You see, whether by nature we tend to look at the glass as half empty or half full, our perceptions determine our inner reality. By nature I am a pessimist, and because of that leaning, I often make up internal stories about the worst things that can happen. When my daughter started to drive, I made up all kinds of stories of dreadful accidents, carjackings, or mechanical failures. (None of which happened, I might add.) When my mammogram results came back suspicious, you can imagine where my mind went. As a result of my thinking habits, I often feel anxious, and my peace and inner sense of well-being vanish.

Optimists can make up some pretty unrealistic stories too. I once watched a man playing blackjack lose \$20,000 thinking positively. He told himself (out loud) that this was his lucky day, he was *the* man, and tonight he'd strike it rich. He allowed his unrealistic story and script of how he wanted things to end to capture his heart, overrule his rational mind, and control his decision-making. (And in chapter 4, we'll see how a woman named Cheryl continued to believe her fantasy story line of a perfect fiancé—despite evidence to the contrary—only to wake up to an abusive husband.)

In order to learn how to be happier, we need to recognize 1) our internal stories and scripts and then 2) how they create expectations that, when unmet, often lead to foolish decisions as well as feeling anxious, miserable, sad, angry, discouraged, and even depressed.

Core Lies We Believe

There are many story lines and scripts that lead to misery and unhappiness, but the first clue in discovering your particular one is

to look for the words *should*, *shouldn't*, *ought*, *supposed to*, and *deserve* and then listen to what comes next. Let's examine three of the most powerful ones.

“I should be better than I am”

Many people suffer because they fail to live up to their own expectations of themselves. Keith worked three part-time jobs just to put himself through college. He was proud of his accomplishments, but he started getting anxious and discouraged when some of his grades slipped from A's to B's and he fell behind in his rent payment. He studied long into the night, often forsaking sleep. He was cranky, exhausted, and definitely not happy.

But when I challenged his schedule, he insisted, “I should be able to handle this.” He refused to accept reality. His self-concept was based on an idealized image of himself, not the truth. Keith is not a god—he is a mere mortal. He has limits. He can't function at his best with only four hours of sleep. He isn't able to work three jobs, study all night, sleep adequately, go to college full-time, and get straight A's in all of his subjects. Yet his expectations that he ought to be able to do it all, and his self-hatred for failing to live up to his idealized image of himself, was great.

People who are perfectionists may have a hard time admitting they actually expect they should be perfect all of the time, but deep down that's what they want to be. And they grieve deeply when they fail. They can never be happy, because although they might achieve a moment of perfection, it's unsustainable. Eventually they mess up, can't do something, aren't all-knowing, fail, or make a mistake. The internal shame, self-hatred, and self-reproach can be lethal.

Some individuals may not recognize they have unrealistic expectations of themselves, because they don't expect perfection in every area of their life. For example, Elle wasn't compulsive about her home, but she obsessed over her physical appearance. Every inch of her body and clothing had to look perfect, or she would beat herself up. “I shouldn't

have eaten dinner last night” or, “I should exercise more, I’m so fat,” she’d moan. She even slept with her makeup on so she would look good in the morning. No one was allowed to see her until she was ready, including her best friend.

• • • • • **Terminally Unique** • • • • •

Cindy failed to live up to her idealized version of the perfect Christian wife and mother. In a moment of sin and passion, she committed adultery with a co-worker. Her sorrow was great, but her repentance shallow. Her grief was not because of her sin against her husband or against God, but because she became small in her own eyes for failing to live up to who she thought she was. “I can’t believe I did that,” Cindy lamented.

“Why is it so hard for you to accept you’re a sinner, just like everyone else?” I asked.

“I don’t want to be like everyone else,” she replied.

“That’s part of your problem,” I gently told her. Much of Cindy’s suffering was because she expected herself to be better than everyone else.

• • • • •

People who believe they should be better than they are can’t be happy, because they are morbidly preoccupied with themselves. They become prideful over their perfection or filled with self-hatred at their flaws.

As with Janet, one particular variation on the *I should be better than I am* story line is feeling disappointed with one’s self over never being good enough, pretty enough, worthy enough, thin enough, spiritual enough, rich enough, or smart enough. You get the picture. The goal becomes *I want to be enough*. The question we must ask ourselves is, By whose yardstick will you measure yourself as “good enough”? Inevitably it is one’s own standard, not God’s. Even nonperfectionists like

Janet become self-conscious about their limitations, weaknesses, and flaws when they tell themselves that they shouldn't be that way, or if only they weren't that way, then they would be happy.

When we live by these scripts, we will never feel happy. We (or someone else) will always find some flaw. Let's be honest here. Who could ever say that he or she feels good enough in every area of his or her life? Feeling "good enough" is never the answer to lasting happiness. As soon as we feel good enough in one area, there are ten others where we feel insufficient or inadequate.

When we believe we should be better than we are, we become self-focused, self-centered, and self-absorbed. This leads to anxiety and compulsion, not joy and peace. In later chapters, we'll learn how to accept our not being good enough so we can learn to be happier without having to be perfect.

"I deserve more than I have, and more _____ means more happiness"

All of us have desires, longings, and wants. Much of the time these longings are legitimate, and there is nothing inherently sinful about them. In the introduction I shared about Francine who wanted a loving husband. She desired a better than average marriage. She wasn't asking for too much.

Rhonda had different longings. She wanted more power, more impact, and more purpose in her life. These also are good desires. The problem is when they switch from desires to demands, from longings to expectations. Then whatever we get will never be enough because we deserve more. The story line becomes, *It's all about me and all for me*. When our legitimate hopes, dreams, or desires move into the category of expectations, they escalate into demands—things we feel entitled to or deserving of. And when the demands aren't met, we can feel quite miserable.

Janet had many expectations and demands of others that were unhealthy and unrealistic. Again, most of them included the words

should or *ought*. For example, Janet believed that her mother *should* be a better grandmother. Her friends *ought* to care more about her needs and feelings than they did. Since she continued to live her internal story as if she were both the main character and the most important one, she felt entitled to other people's attention and believed they should put her at the top of their priority list. Her needs, her rights, her wants, and her feelings should come first. Janet often told herself, *If they really loved me, they would care more about my needs and my feelings*. Therefore, when others failed to meet her expectations, she not only felt hurt and angry, she felt unloved.

Janet didn't just *desire* her mother to be more attentive and interested in her children, she *expected* her to be that way. You might argue, What's wrong with expecting your mother to be a good grandmother and to show interest and love for her grandchildren? Nothing's wrong with it—except it didn't line up with the way things really were. Janet's mother was not that kind of grandmother, and as long as Janet kept expecting she should be, Janet would continue to get hurt and disappointed.

The truth is, no one ever gets everything in life that he or she wants or desires. When we live as if we deserve people's love and attention all of the time, then we're not living in reality. Instead of learning how to handle in a mature way the inevitable disappointment of not getting all that we want, we stay miserable.

In addition to our own internal unrealistic expectations, we also live in a culture that encourages people to demand their rights and to feel entitled. After all, we're worth it! Because of this mind-set, people sometimes make terrible choices. They tell themselves they have the right to be happy and to pursue whatever it takes to be happy, even at the expense of others. I recall a woman I counseled telling me this very thing. She had fallen in love with her boss at work. She was a Christian, yet she believed God wanted her to be happy, and therefore he wouldn't want her to stay married if she found her true love elsewhere. Despite my fervent warnings to think more carefully, she chose to end her marriage in order to get what she wanted.

When we are the main character of our story line and it is all about us, then we justify pursuing what we think makes us happy, even if it makes those around us (like this woman's husband and three children) very unhappy. But we will never find true happiness at the expense of others. That will lead only to more heartache.

Whether our expectations are unrealistic, unhealthy, or just unmet, we become unhappy when we believe we're entitled to have more than we have. Instead of feeling thankful for what we do have, we grumble and complain about what we don't. The apostle Paul told us that he had discovered the secret of being content, whether he had a lot or a little (Philippians 4:11-12). The secret is surrendering to God's plan—not getting all your needs, wants, desires, or expectations fulfilled.

“Life should be easy and fair”

When we pine for an easy life, we forfeit a fulfilling life. We become bored and apathetic, not happy. Author Gary Haugen tells a story of going on a trip but missing the adventure. During a camping and hiking vacation to Mount Rainier with his father and brothers, his dad wanted them all to climb the rock formation heading to the summit. Gary felt afraid and asked his father to allow him to stay behind at the visitor's center where he could watch the videos and read about the wildlife and history of the mountain. After much pleading, his father finally relented. Here's the rest of Gary's story:

The visitor's center was warm and comfortable, with lots of interesting things to watch and read. I devoured the information and explored every corner, and judging by the crowd, it was clearly the place to be. As the afternoon stretched on, however, the massive visitor's center started to feel awfully small. The warm air felt stuffy, and the stuffed wild animals started to seem just—dead. The inspiring loop videos about extraordinary people who climbed the mountain weren't as interesting the sixth and seventh times, and

they made me wish I could be one of those actually climbing the mountain instead of reading about it. I felt bored, sleepy and small—and I missed my dad. I was totally stuck. Totally safe—but totally stuck.

After the longest afternoon of my ten-year-old life, Dad and my brothers returned flushed with their triumph. Their faces were wet from the snow; they were famished, dehydrated and nursing scrapes from the rocks and ice, but on the long drive home they had something else. They had stories and an unforgettable day with their dad on a great mountain. I, of course, revealed nothing, insisting that it was my favorite day of the whole vacation.

Truth be told—I went on the trip and missed the adventure.¹

When Jesus tells us that he has come to give us an abundant life, he doesn't mean a safe and comfortable life, but a meaningful one. He calls us to a purpose beyond pleasing ourselves.

As we've already seen, Janet expected life to be easy and fair. She seemed mentally, emotionally, and spiritually unprepared for life's ordinary bumps and hurdles. Yet Jesus clearly tells us, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus warns us that life isn't easy or fair, and he tells us this so that we can experience peace and find courage in the midst of life's hardships.

How? You'll find some specific tools in later chapters, but it starts by seeing things as they really are. Jesus tells us that if our eye is healthy, our whole body will be full of light (Matthew 6:22). Happiness, joy, peace, and an internal sense of well-being are never found in having an easy life or in a life full of possessions, power, or popularity. We only have to look at some of the Hollywood celebrities gracing the news these days to see individuals living an easy life. On the fairness quotient, they have the deck stacked in their favor. They have most of the things we tell ourselves we need to be happy. They are thin, beautiful,

rich, popular, powerful, and have lots of possessions. Yet many of them appear purposeless and empty and actually look quite unhappy. These men and women may have pleasure, power, prosperity, and popularity, but they do not have happiness. Never confuse those things with a genuine inner sense of joy, peace, and well-being.

In fact, it is often when life is easy and good, plentiful and prosperous, that God warns us we are in the most danger of losing sight of what brings our soul true delight. When the Israelites were entering the Promised Land, God warned them,

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

The Adaptation Principle

If we want to increase our capacity for genuine inner happiness, we must begin to debunk our belief that having more _____, or changes in our life circumstances, will make us significantly happier than we already are. The problem with this thinking is that it feels true. Losing weight, or getting a new job, home, or husband does make us feel happier for a time, but it's only a temporary fix. After we get what we want, our mind naturally moves on to the next thing that is wrong, or what we want, or what we believe will make us happy.

When Janet finally found a new job that she liked and that paid well, she felt much better. But her newfound happiness lasted about two weeks. Then she was right back where she had been—unhappy with her life, even though she liked her new job. Psychologists have called this the *adaptation principle*. Over time, we become accustomed

to or get used to our new life situation, whether it is better or worse, and eventually return to our normal happiness range.²

• • • • • **I'll Be Happy Forever, Mom!** • • • • •

I remember my son, Ryan, endlessly nagging me for a special toy. He was convinced that if only he had this one gadget, life would be good. He was so persuasive, I believed him. Eager to make him happy, I bought him the toy. He was thrilled. But three days later, I saw it lying under his bed. Now he was pleading for a new plaything he needed to be happy. As adults, often we're not any different.

• • • • •

The writer of Ecclesiastes discovered this truth much earlier than the psychologists did. This book is written by a king who had an easy life. Most believe it was written by King Solomon, King David's son with Bathsheba. Solomon had everything he wanted and enjoyed the things our culture promotes as giving us a satisfying life. He had enormous power, whatever pleasure his heart desired, plenty of possessions, a productive life, popularity, and over 700 wives and 300 concubines. Yet in the end, when he looked over everything in his life, it felt empty. Power, possessions, popularity, and prosperity weren't enough to bring him true happiness.

The king discovered, as we all must if we want to find authentic happiness, that he had wrongly depended on something other than God to give him what only God could give.

Dismantling Our Story Line

To begin the process of learning *how* to be a happier person, we must see the deception of our internal story line and replace it with the truth. Most of us feel powerless to do this without some outside help. God already knows our weaknesses, and so what he often does

to free us of our illusions and delusions is allow disappointment, pain, and suffering into our lives. This gives us the chance to wake up and see what matters most.

Recently, I was talking with Beth, who, like Francine, has been chronically disappointed and unhappy in her marriage. Her expectations for a loving and intimate relationship with her husband have never been met, and her years of heartache over such disappointment were laced with resentment and anger. But through some unexpected health problems, she has begun to wake up to her life and to a deeper walk with God. As a result, she's appreciating the smaller things and noticing what's good in her marriage instead of what's wrong. She has learned to let go of her expectations without deadening her desires for a better relationship. And that's an important distinction. It's not that we don't desire certain things, but we don't *demand* them anymore!

"It hasn't been easy finding this path of joy and contentment," Beth said. "I can easily slip back into my old resentment and depression. This new road feels as thin as a thread's width. But I want to learn to stay on it."

Jesus tells us that the road that leads to life is narrow (Matthew 7:14). I don't think he is referring merely to eternal life; he's speaking about the abundant life. The king in Ecclesiastes pursued what he thought was the abundant life in all of his accomplishments, power, possessions, and pleasures. But through the disappointment of success,³ he realized that even those wonderful things didn't offer him all he thought they would. He left these final words for us so we might glean understanding into what brings the heart true joy:

Light is sweet; how pleasant to see a new day dawning.

When people live to be very old, let them rejoice in every day of life. But let them also remember there will be many dark days. Everything still to come is meaningless.

Young people, it is wonderful to be young! Enjoy every minute of it. Do everything you want to do; take it all in.

But remember that you must give an account to God for everything you do. So refuse to worry, and keep your body healthy. But remember that youth, with a whole life before you, is meaningless.

Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and say, "Life is not pleasant anymore." Remember him before the light of the sun, moon, and stars is dim to your old eyes, and rain clouds continually darken your sky...

Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken. Don't wait until the water jar is smashed at the spring and the pulley is broken at the well. For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 11:7-10; 12:1,2,6,7 NLT)

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us a powerful lesson. We will always be disappointed with life (or others) when we ask it to do something it wasn't designed to do. If we can learn to appreciate our life, our marriage, our job, or our family for what they are, then we can experience joy, wonder, and gratitude more readily.

Through Janet's disappointment with herself, other people, and life, she began to ask some important questions as well as gain some new insights that led her to see Christ, herself, and her life through a new lens. She finally began to grasp that it was her expectations that were causing much of her pain. She realized that when she expected so much from others, life, or even herself, then even the good things she did have or receive, were never good enough. As she surrendered her internal story line, Janet was surprised to discover some peace and happiness even in the midst of painful situations.

The psalmist also felt sad and perplexed over life's disappointments. But he came to understand through his suffering, that he needed to put his hope in God, not in other things (Psalm 42). Jesus loves us too much to leave us thinking or believing that a rich and meaningful life is found

in anything other than loving and serving him. He tells us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). Another way of saying this is, where our pleasure is, our treasure is also.



Jesus has come to set the captives free. Whether we realize it or not, many of us are captive to the lie that something other than God will bring us happiness and fulfill our longings. When we put our hope in or expect something or someone other than him to fill us and make us happy, he will surely frustrate us. But he doesn't do it to punish us. He does it to rescue us from our disordered attachments and delusions, and from ourselves. God promises to meet our needs—but what we feel we need, and what we truly need, may be very different.

Our disappointments and sorrows in life are gifts given to help us see things correctly. C.S. Lewis writes, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴ Disappointment can lead us out of illusion and into truth and reality. Sorrow teaches us to let go of our attachments to false or lesser things and to seek after God. True prosperity is never acquired through worldly accomplishments or possessions, but rather through the awareness and ability to live in God's loving presence.

Peter tells us that suffering teaches us to be done with sin and to live for God's purposes rather than our own pleasures and evil desires (1 Peter 4:1-5). Why? Because suffering helps us surrender our illusions, desires, and expectations of what life *should* be so we're freed to live as God designed us to be (1 Peter 1:6).

Can you begin to let go by surrendering these lies to God, trusting him that he knows what you need to be happy? If you can't just yet, don't despair. He will help you. He wants to give you a new script to help you live a new story—a story that will bring more peace, more joy, more love, and more hope to your life.

Questions for
Thought and Discussion

1. How did you relate to Janet? Have you considered that some of your unhappiness may come from unmet expectations of God, others, or life?
2. If you haven't already, fill in the blanks: "If only I had more _____ or a better _____, I'd be happy." Recall a time when you got what you wanted. How long did your happiness last?
3. What do you think of this observation: "Expectations are longings and desires that have become demands"? What are your demands of God, others, or yourself?
4. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer stated,

All striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one's condition, and is therefore suffering so long as it is not satisfied. No satisfaction, however, is lasting; on the contrary, it is always merely the starting point of fresh striving.⁵

How have you experienced this in your own life?

5. Which core lie do you struggle with? How has it affected your happiness levels?
 - I ought to be more than I am
 - I deserve to have more than God gave me
 - Life should be fair

6. Reflect on the author's statement, "When we believe we should be better than we are, we become self-focused, self-centered, and self-absorbed. This leads to anxiety and compulsion, not joy and peace." How have you found this to be true in your own life?

7. Read Psalm 73:12-14. Listen to Asaph's unspoken expectations of God as he surveyed his life and what was going on around him. Why did he feel he deserved better?

8. Discuss the difference between acknowledging the truth and emotionally accepting it. (For example, *I know I'm in a difficult marriage, but I'm not okay with it.*) Next, review each core lie:
 - I ought to be more than I am
 - I deserve to have more than God gave me
 - Life should be fair

In what ways do you acknowledge the truth throughout this chapter, but still resist emotionally accepting it? How does your refusal to emotionally embrace God's truth contribute to your unhappiness?

9. Read Acts 14:15. How has disappointment and suffering helped you turn from vain things and turn toward God?

10. Read Psalm 63. What steps can you take to be more satisfied with God and less hungry for other things?

11. Jesus came to set the captives free. How have you been trapped in your stories and scripts? What do you need to surrender in order to experience greater happiness in your life?