

Love Life Again

FINDING JOY WHEN
LIFE IS HARD

Tracie Miles

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Introduction

Before the plane even backed away from the gate, the captain gave us a disturbing warning: “It’s been a rough day in the air, folks. Prepare yourself for tremendous turbulence.”

As the words *tremendous turbulence* seeped into my mind, I wondered if it was too late to run for the door. I had a tight schedule, and our flight was already delayed, so I knew waiting for another flight wasn’t an option. Plus, it was unlikely I’d be able to get off the plane, given that we had already backed away from the gate. So I tightened my seat belt, took a deep breath, and said a prayer for safety.

All was well the first thirty minutes of the flight, but then the captain’s warning became a reality.

It was the worst turbulence I’d ever experienced. The plane rocked back and forth, up and down. Heads were bobbing, necks were jerking, and I could hear luggage sliding around in the overhead bins. When the flight attendant began distributing sickness bags, I wondered if I would soon need one.

To make matters worse, the pilot could not land the plane because of the high winds and heavy rain. After flying in circles

around the airport for over an hour, the plane was running out of fuel. We couldn't wait any longer for the storm to blow past, so air traffic control rerouted our plane to another state, and we were finally able to land.

Yes, I said "another *state*," not another airport. And, yes, I said "running out of fuel."

I didn't really believe we would crash, but the possibility of that happening still made me a bit anxious. I knew plane crashes are typically avoidable and highly unlikely and our captain and flight crew were experienced and capable of getting us safely to our destination.

But still ... *what if?*

What if the worst happened?

Was I ready to die? Had I lived life to the fullest? Did I have any regrets? Should I have done things differently? Should I have laughed more, loved stronger, hugged harder, and lived more abundantly? Should I have done more for other people? Had I let problems and busyness steal my ability to enjoy life?

That flight seemed to last forever and a day, and I had a lot of time to think. I thought about all my loved ones, especially my three precious children. What were my last words to them? Were they kind or harsh? Were they words filled with love or detailed instructions of what they were to do during my absence? When was the last time I had told my parents, siblings, and friends how much they meant to me?

Then my thoughts began heading in a new direction. Did I have any unfinished business, fences that needed mending, or people I needed to forgive and extend grace to? Were there friends I had been meaning to call or visit yet I hadn't taken the time to do so? Was there anything God had called me to do that I hadn't done because of lack

of time, procrastination, or a fear of stepping out in faith? What had I done lately to serve others and be the hands and feet of Jesus?

My thoughts continued to spiral. If I never made it back home, had I prepared my children spiritually and emotionally to be able to handle life, follow their hearts, trust God, and walk in faith? Had I taught them life is precious and meant to be enjoyed? Did they know and believe it is possible to have a positive mind-set and live an optimistic, joy-filled life in good times and in bad? Had I been a good role model for living out these truths?

Had I lived as if I truly loved my life?

As I stared out my little oval window at the rain pelting the side of the plane, I intentionally began to fill my mind with new thoughts. All the things that had consumed my mind when I boarded the plane lost their urgency as I pondered the life I had been given and how I had been living it.

I began thanking God for all the gifts He had given me, starting with the small, everyday blessings I usually take for granted and ending with the people, things, pleasures, and faith that make my life worth living. I promised God and myself that if I ever got off that plane, I would intentionally and purposefully enjoy the life He had given me. I determined to be grounded in the truth, live the truth, and allow that truth to fill my mind with joy and contentment. To love my life every single day, even when problems or difficult circumstances raged around me, threatening to steal my joy.

I averted my gaze from the window and looked down at my travel bag, noticing my Bible sticking out of the top. I reached down and picked it up, determined to find a distraction from the storm outside and the one inside my head.

The first verse I looked at was James 4:14: “How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone.” Wow! How timely, to say the least!

In this chapter, James was reprimanding the wealthy for making plans without acknowledging God’s control over their lives and for their tendency to prioritize worldly things rather than things that were important from God’s perspective. They had gotten so caught up in “doing life” and carrying out their oh-so-important plans that they had forgotten how priceless the gift of life truly was and overlooked the importance of making God the foundation of their thoughts, feelings, plans, and actions.

We too can get so caught up in our to-do lists, striving to achieve success, reach our goals, and acquire more stuff that we forget to love the life we’ve been given. Or we can become so consumed with focusing on all the things in our lives that aren’t going as we would like and allow our adversities to rob us of joy and optimism and gradually develop a bitter, negative outlook. All of which causes us, much like the people James was addressing, to inadvertently take the gift of life for granted, neglect to aim for living with God’s perspective, and forget all the reasons we have to be thankful for the life we’ve been given, even when it’s not the life we thought we’d have.

Sweet friend, you don’t have to search for a different life in order to enjoy life; you simply have to embrace the one you have by putting Christ at the center and asking Him to help you enjoy life, despite life.

In Ecclesiastes 3:12–13, Solomon summarized what he learned in his search for a happy life: “So I concluded there is nothing better

than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God.” Simply put, Solomon realized we can’t know how long we’ll live on this earth. He discovered that life is a gift from God and is meant to be enjoyed.

When was the last time you felt joyful about your life? Regardless of what may be breaking your heart and stealing your ability to feel happy and joyful, God’s desire is for you to delight in the life He is allowing you to live, starting today. In fact, He has already equipped you to enjoy life even during those seasons when you feel broken, confused, frustrated, overwhelmed, underappreciated, disillusioned, disappointed, or just plain bored with the humdrum of your life.

If you’re longing to love life again, I invite you to join me on a journey to start doing exactly that. Within these pages you will find tips, tools, and practical steps to help you live life to the fullest. Everything you do as you learn to love your life again will be a faith-fueled step in the right direction. You can’t change how you responded to yesterday, but you can change how you respond to tomorrow. It’s within your power to experience the satisfying life you’ve been hoping for.

The first step to loving life again is believing it is possible for you.

Today can be the first day of the rest of your abundant, joy-filled life. Are you ready?

Embrace Contentment

There came a time I had to accept that my life had not turned out the way I thought it would and no amount of wishing it were different was going to change it.

I thought I had done all the right things and was on track for living out the life I envisioned. I graduated from college, got married, had three children, and pursued a career for fifteen years until deciding to be a stay-at-home mom. I had stayed committed to my promises and persevered through thick and thin. I had made my faith and following God a priority and even served in ministry. Although not perfect by any means, I had honored my marriage vows and tried my best to be a loving, devoted wife and the best mom I could be. I had kept my family and friends close. But sometimes on the road of life we come across an unexpected bump, causing our plans to get derailed and our hopes to be crushed. Then one day something tragic or life altering happens that drains the joy out of living, or we simply

wake up and realize the life we are living is not the one we expected, much less the one we wanted.

Perhaps you can relate. Maybe you had a dream crushed after years of pursuing it. Perhaps you stayed at a job for thirty years, building your retirement fund, only to have that company go bankrupt and take your life savings down with it. Perhaps you've experienced the heartbreak of infertility when you planned on having a house full of children. Maybe you had a loved one die far too soon. Maybe you were struck with a disease that limits your abilities and independence. Maybe you thought you'd be married by now but are still single, or maybe you invested years in a marriage that ended in divorce.

I don't know what you've faced, but whatever happened that changed your life or rocked your world just may have snatched your love for life too. And as a result, maybe you don't think you can ever love life again.

Trust me, friend. I understand.

I had been married for twenty-six years, ten months, and five days when my divorce became final. After many painful months of separation, it had become obvious that reconciliation was not possible because of my husband's refusal to stop the behaviors and infidelity that caused the marriage to fail, leaving divorce as the only option. My heart was broken. My dreams of growing old with my husband—dancing arm in arm at our children's weddings, buying a beach house to enjoy together in retirement, celebrating future holidays and special occasions with our kids and their families, bouncing our grandbabies on our knees—were shattered the day he chose to leave the life we had built together.

As a woman, I felt rejected, betrayed, humiliated, devastated, afraid, and terribly alone.

As a mom, I felt overwhelmed with grief and worry about how this situation would permanently scar my children's hearts and helpless as to how ease their pain.

As the sole provider, I worried about having enough money to take care of my children's needs and keep us afloat. As weeks turned into months, bills were going unpaid, debt was piling up, and the home we'd lived in for over twenty years was in jeopardy of foreclosure. It seemed spiritual warfare was fierce, and bizarre things kept happening to me and my children. I perpetually felt overwhelmed and hopeless. Crippling fear, worry, and stress became my constant companions. The weight of all I was facing seemed almost too much to bear. I wondered if my heart would ever mend, if the hurt would ever lessen, if the loneliness would ever feel less lonely, and if I would ever feel strong, stable, and secure again.

I constantly grappled with the hardest question of all: *Would I ever be able to love life again?*

I spent every day consumed with despair and worry. I began to spend more time at home, depression sinking in, avoiding the emotional energy it would take to interact with people in public. I stopped doing many of the things I loved like playing tennis, shopping, and hanging out with friends. I took a sabbatical from doing ministry as my heart tried to heal. And I even stopped going to church to avoid the obligation of awkward small talk and a fake smile. Happiness and laughter seemed to be things of the past.

For the first time ever, I began keeping an extensive journal. I quickly realized it was a safe, private place for me to vent and pour

out my feelings to God. Little did I know that this journal would become one of the things He would use to heal my heart and provide me with evidence of His work in my life.

On March 19, six months after my husband left, I wrote this entry:

Spent an hour in prayer this morning after waking up crying ... again. Feeling so overwhelmed with sadness and grief that I couldn't get a grip on my emotions. I just wish my life were different. It's not what I wanted it to be—for me or my children. I wish my family wasn't broken. I wish I could make everything better, but I just can't change or fix anything. I can't make my husband love me or want to be a part of our family. I can't heal my children's hearts. I can't ignore all the problems that cause me angst and worry. I'm tired. Tired of the stress and the emotional drain of this unfamiliar life. Tired of the heartache and pain. Tired of the fear. Tired of dealing with life. Physically, emotionally, and mentally tired. I try to put on a good face for the kids when they're home, although there are days when it's impossible to hold back the tears. And I try to be strong around others, but I feel like I'm losing who I am. I don't understand why all this has happened.

“Lord, I don't want to be broken anymore. I want to be whole again. I want to feel whole and

complete, even if my marriage is over. Even though my heart is broken, I don't want to be a broken woman. I don't want to be a broken soul. I don't want to feel broken anymore. I want to enjoy life again. Fill me with joy, peace, and rest in You. I'm tired; give me strength. Restore to me the joy of my salvation. The ache in my soul is so deep; please lessen the ache. I don't understand why this has all happened and how it is all going to turn out. But I want to love my life again, right now, no matter what it looks like. Help me love life again, even while life is hard. Amen."

One day after writing that prayer, I read my daily devotional, and the truths I read reminded me not to let my desire to understand *why* I was going through this painful journey distract me from experiencing God's presence. It reminded me that God could indeed equip me to get through each day victoriously; I simply had to choose to let Him be the source of my joy, even in the midst of less-than-joyful circumstances of life.

Upon reading that devotional, I made the choice to stop letting my circumstances dictate my love for life. Over the many months that followed, I walked closely with God and implemented the steps I've outlined in this book. I have stumbled in my efforts more than once, but each time, I picked myself back up and started the next day afresh. I came to realize that it was not only within my reach to love my life again but also 100 percent within my control.

Friend, loving life is a choice, and we all have the power to choose to love our lives. Our own happiness is up to us. No person or circumstance has the power to take away our happiness or love for life without our permission. No matter what situation you find yourself in today, happiness is within your reach too.

If you're in a fragile, lonely, disheartened, or fearful place today—whatever that place looks like—please stick with me. I have learned it is possible to love our lives, despite what's going on or how much life has changed. My deepest prayer is that you will discover that it is possible for you to love your life again too.

But just maybe you're reading this and thinking that nothing big, dramatic, or life shattering has happened to derail your life or change it at all. In fact, life is the same as it has always been. Same ol' circumstances, different day. And therein lies the problem. You're bored and frustrated with life in general and often find yourself thinking, *Surely there has to be more to life than this*. It might seem as if everyone else's life is more exciting, more rewarding, easier, or simply better than yours. You feel let down by what life has given you or how it's turned out, and you're discontent. Maybe you even feel let down by God.

The truth is, regardless of what situation we find ourselves in, we all *want* to be excited about our lives. We know we *should* appreciate life even when it's hard and good is always present even during bad times, but it's a challenge to think that way when our hearts are heavy. We know we're *supposed* to be content, but we still get caught up striving for more or resenting what is not to our liking. And when life seems boring and routine, we often overlook the blessings God has given us because we're more focused on what we don't have than what we do.

It's challenging to be content in today's world. In fact, contentment seems to have become a lost art. We are constantly bombarded with images of newer, bigger, and improved items that will supposedly make our lives happier, fuller, and more satisfying. We scroll through social media and feel discontent with our home, spouse, car, kids, vacations, clothes, shoes, and everything else because we think others have it better. We watch love stories on television and begin to feel unhappy with our own relationships as we compare them with those of fictional characters, or maybe even with real-life relationships that seem better than our own. It's tempting to compare our lives with others' or think "If only ..." but these thoughts open the door for discontentment, allowing it to sink into our hearts and minds and choke our joy. Discontentment sabotages our happiness.

Hebrews 13:5 says, "Don't be obsessed with getting more material things. Be relaxed with what you have" (THE MESSAGE). This verse instructs us not to look for happiness in money or material things. We are to be satisfied with the present and with what we have been given. To be content with where God has us in the present moment. Period.

FIGHT YOUR TRUE ENEMY

When life is hard or disappointing, it's easy to get stuck in a negative mind-set, especially when we feel as if life should be one way but instead it's another way entirely and we don't like it one bit. We feel stuck when it seems we've done everything possible to bring about change yet nothing seems to change at all. We feel stuck when we're

constantly trying to manipulate things to go our way, control things that are out of our control, and change people who we have no power to change. When our lives are filled with obligations we “have to” meet or responsibilities we know we “should” or “must” do, we can feel as if we’re caught in quicksand. We get stuck in discontentment, even if we have countless reasons to love our lives and feel thankful.

When I’ve felt stuck in a season I didn’t want to be in, I’ve inadvertently lost sight of the fact that there was a war going on for my joy and happiness. I became so focused on the problems that I stopped focusing on the enemy I was really fighting.

John 10:10, the anchor verse for this book, reminds us, “The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy.” How often we forget this warning. All too often we think our enemy is society, people, circumstances, or hardships. But the reality is that Satan is our enemy, not people or circumstances. While he is not in control of this world and what happens, he can wage war on our hearts and minds. He can convince us that we have a right to be grumpy and no reason to be joyful. He can feed us nagging lies to keep us discouraged, angry, unforgiving, or without hope.

One of his most insidious lies is that God has it out for us. Satan loves to whisper this lie when bad things happen to us, things we don’t deserve. But God is not the enemy. Satan is. God is always for us and never against us. Romans 8:31 says, “What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?” This verse doesn’t promise we’ll never experience persecution or pain, but it does affirm God is never against us. He is always fighting for us. Also, in 1 John 4:16 we read, “God is love.” He is incapable of evil because love is the opposite of evil.

While it's Satan's goal to keep us stuck in discontentment, in John 10:10 we also see Jesus offer great hope that we don't have to live that way. He told His listeners,

“My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.”

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (ESV)

“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.” (THE MESSAGE)

Jesus died not just so we could have eternal life but so we could enjoy abundant life here on earth.

Does it excite you to think you can have a rich and satisfying life? An abundant life? A life better than you've ever dreamed of? A life you love? Me too! But maybe in the back of your mind, there is still that nagging voice telling you that happiness is not possible *for you* because _____ (fill in the blank with your why).

That, my friend, is the voice of the enemy. Don't listen to it. It is not coming from God, and is it not true.

To understand this promise of abundant life, it helps to look at the context of this verse. In John 10, Jesus taught that He is the shepherd and we are His sheep, and there is an enemy who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy us. But in verse 10, Jesus declared that He came to earth so we could not only live but live abundantly. He was

conveying that He is the answer to experiencing the best life ever; He is what gives our lives meaning and joy.

William Barclay explained it this way:

Jesus claims that he came that men might have life and might have it more abundantly. The Greek phrase used for *having it more abundantly* means to have a *superabundance of a thing*. To be a follower of Jesus, to know who he is and what he means, is to have a superabundance of life. A Roman soldier came to Julius Caesar with a request for permission to commit suicide. He was a wretched, dispirited creature with no vitality. Caesar looked at him. “Man,” he said, “were you ever really alive?” When we try to live our own lives, life is a dull, dispirited thing. When we walk with Jesus, there comes a new vitality, a superabundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living and we begin to live in the real sense of the word.¹

You do not have to stay stuck in a life of unhappiness. You do not have to let your circumstances or other people dictate your ability to feel joy. You do not have to let discontentment poison your heart and mind and blind you to the wonderful life God has given you. The situations in your life may stay the same, but you do not have to live the same after today. You know who the enemy is; now stand up and fight.

WITHIN OUR REACH

Here's the thing: life is precious; our days are numbered. When we keep this in mind, it can motivate us to fight the enemy and live every day to the fullest.

According to Paul, we can learn to be happy with the life we have been given. In Philippians 4:12, he told the church at Philippi, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (NIV). Considering the apostle Paul's difficult life, this is pretty amazing. He wrote these words while he was sitting in a dark, dirty prison cell. He had been arrested on false charges by corrupt officials and was facing the possibility of execution, yet he wrote he had learned to be content with whatever he had, which at the moment was literally nothing, not even his freedom. How could he feel that way after all he'd been through ... and while he was in prison? Regardless of his circumstances and despite having endured much persecution and loss, Paul enjoyed peace and inner rest because his heart was right with God and he believed God was in control.

Contentment is a virtue we learn and develop through faith alone, and it plays a huge role in our happiness. When we are content, we are free to enjoy every blessing God has given us rather than constantly be searching for more. When we are content, we are resting in the knowledge that at the end of life, all that will really matter is our relationship with people we love, our relationship with God, and whether or not we lived life to the fullest. Nothing else is going to matter at all.

Let me be clear. God cares about what we want; He just doesn't want our wants to be more important to us than He is. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires." In other words, when we put God first—above everything else—and want Him more than the stuff we wish we had or think we need, He will give us the desires of our hearts because those desires will align with what He wants for us. As Joyce Meyer once put it, "If we're lusting after something and we think we can't be happy without that, God's not going to give us that. Because then our joy is in the thing, not in Him."²

The life you are living today—and all it includes or doesn't include—is the life God has given you. It is the life you are supposed to love, despite what it might look like. It is the only life you have and the only life you are going to get. You can make the most of it and live it abundantly, or you can let life pass you by as you allow problems or drudgery to steal your zest for living. You can choose to be content and joyful, or you can choose to be disgruntled and sad.

The day I uttered that prayer of brokenness and heard God's voice after reading the devotional was the day I finally made this choice for myself. I was exhausted from waking up every day with an ache in my soul, wondering how I was going to make it through the day. I was tired of feeling stuck in unhappiness and in a difficult season and longed to feel inner joy and peace once again. One day after a deep time of prayer, I realized I could continue to wish things were different and obsess and cry over my problems, or I could determine to make things different inside my own heart and

head. I could start fighting for my joy, or I could continue to let the enemy be in control of my happiness. I could courageously fight the war, or I could stay stuck and let the enemy win. In faith I boldly chose to deal with my unhappiness by embracing contentment.

You can make that choice too, starting today.

Life is not always a bed of roses. It's not always exciting. It's not always easy. It's not always fair. It's not always overflowing with opportunity and adventure. Consequently, we're all going to feel a sense of unhappiness or discontentment from time to time. We won't always feel like jumping out of bed in the morning and putting on our "I love my life!" T-shirts. But when we realize we are struggling with discontentment, that's the perfect time to choose to embrace contentment.

We can choose to embrace contentment when we struggle to make ends meet every month or can't afford that new outfit we really want. We can embrace contentment when we find ourselves secretly envying the relationships, marriages, or financial status of others. We can embrace contentment when our hearts are broken, when we lose people we treasured, or when life just seems to be giving us lemons.

Loving life is a choice, not a by-product of everything going our way. The choice to love life is ours, and our peace, joy, contentment, fulfillment, and overall happiness depend on the choice we make.

LOVE YOUR LIFE CHALLENGE #1

Recognize discontentment and reclaim authority over your happiness.

Reflect

Do you feel stuck in a negative season or mind-set that is stealing your joy?

How might your life change if you were to recognize and then address your discontentment by putting God first and choosing to fight for your happiness?

Act

Identify what change you believed needed to happen in order for you to be happy. Commit today to start choosing to be happy with the life you have, even if the desired change does not happen right away. Fully allow yourself to believe God hears your prayers and longs to meet the desires of your heart, but commit to living with joy and contentment as you wait to see God move in your circumstances, heart, and life.

Pray

Lord, I am committing to having a new take on life, starting today. I boldly reclaim my life and my joy from the enemy, who wants to steal,

kill, and destroy it. I refuse to let him rob me of enjoying the life You have given me by poisoning my mind with discontentment. Today I choose to embrace contentment. In Jesus' name, amen.

Smile

Spend some time outside enjoying nature. Let the sunshine warm your skin. Listen for the sounds of birds or crickets. Take a deep breath and fill your lungs with fresh air. Take a leisurely walk, and rather than letting your mind park on problems, think about all the things that bring a smile to your face.