

*Blessed Are the Unsatisfied:
Finding Spiritual Freedom in an
Imperfect World*

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“God has us right where he wants us when we are unsatisfied, longing for the better world he has planned. God does not want us to be satisfied in this life, but to experience the blessings that come with intentionally living an unsatisfied life even as we embrace fulfillment, meaning, the pleasure of God’s good gifts, and contentment, and as we look forward to full satisfaction.”

— Amy Simpson, author of *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied*

Live Your Best Life Now!

TV preachers like Kenneth Copeland tell us what many of us most want to hear: “God intends for you to be satisfied in every area of your life.”

For Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest church in the United States, finding spiritual, emotional, and even material satisfaction in a relationship with God is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. “God wants you to live a satisfied life,” he writes.

He wants you to have a life filled with an abundance of joy, an abundance of happiness. God doesn’t want you simply to survive that marriage. God wants to turn it around and restore you with a strong, healthy, rewarding relationship. God doesn’t want your business to merely make it through the murky economic waters. He wants your business to sail and to excel! When God restores, He always brings you out better, improved, increased, and multiplied. He has a vision of total victory for your life!

Christian teacher Joyce Meyer presents a similar formula for Christian living: “God cares about everything about you and everything that concerns you. He wants to be good to you and He will never disappoint you. Give Him all of your heart and put all of your hope and expectation in Him. You can have true contentment and satisfaction in Christ!” She promises big emotional benefits from obedience: “I encourage you to let God shape you into someone who loves and actually longs for His correction. Because by bending to His will, we can become healed and whole, satisfied and happy.”

Many people interpret these promises to mean getting what they want. But getting what we want doesn’t deliver what we think it will. Open a search engine and type “It didn’t make me happy,” and you’ll find stories of people getting married, getting divorced, having a family, finding and losing jobs, converting to one religion or another, gaining and losing weight, making money, giving it away, moving from one place to another, reaching career goals. You’ll find story after story of people getting what they want and finding it didn’t give them what they thought it would. If you keep looking, you might find the story of Donna Mikkin, who achieved what many people are dreaming of: she won the lottery.

In 2007, Donna and her husband, Ed, won \$34.5 million through the New York State Lottery. And now she says, “my life was hijacked by the lottery.” Far from improving her life, the windfall made things worse. “Most of us think that winning the lottery is the ultimate fulfillment. But I found that wasn’t the case. Most people look at winning the lottery as some magic pot of gold waiting for you at the end of the rainbow.” But it brought her no peace, happiness, or contentment, and she became a person she didn’t want to be.

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"In Blessed Are the Unsatisfied, Amy Simpson puts a positive spin on what is usually perceived as a negative state of mind. She avoids making unrealistic promises of full and perfect satisfaction in this fallen world, as some are inclined to do. Instead, she shows how 'unsatisfaction' can motivate us to pursue a deeper relationship with God and with others, to learn, grow, and change ourselves, and to invest our energies in making this world a better place for others. Seems we could all use a little more unsatisfaction."

—Carolyn Custis James,
author of *Half the Church* and
Malestrom

Lest you believe Mikkin is an isolated case, consider this. Experts say 70 percent of people who win the lottery (or otherwise come to a sudden windfall of money) are bankrupt within five years. Some lottery winners learn to manage their wealth and don't regret their wins, but many, like Mikkin, feel like anything but winners. Their lives are dogged by mistrust, anxiety, and the consequences of foolish choices. Some meet with violence, others with constant requests for money. Some say their winnings are cursed. Others simply don't like the person they see in the mirror. They say things like "I don't like what I've become" and "I'd have been better off broke."

Multiple studies have shown that while people may feel happier once they rise above the poverty level, above that more money does not generally improve people's sense of well-being. Psychologists point to various reasons why having more money doesn't necessarily make people happier than they were before — and can actually make people miserable. One is the idea of experience stretching, the concept that as we are able to enjoy more of what money can buy, we enjoy the simpler pleasures in life less. So the things people used to enjoy before winning the lottery no longer give them joy.

In one classic study, conducted in the 1970s, researchers compared lottery winners with people who had recently suffered severe injuries that had left them with either partial or total paralysis. The study found that these accident victims derived more pleasure from everyday activities than the lottery winners. As the study's authors explained, "Eventually, the thrill of winning the lottery will itself wear off. If all things are judged by the extent to which they depart from a baseline of past experience, gradually even the most positive events will cease to have impact as they themselves are absorbed into the new baseline against which further events are judged." In other words, we have a tendency to adjust our expectations, and our standard of what will make us happy, to match our experiences. Happiness is a moving target.

The stories of miserable lottery winners are about people who bought tickets because they thought winning would make their lives better. And like so many of us, they have discovered a decidedly biblical truth: the places we seek satisfaction often fail to provide it. In fact, they can leave us more miserable.

All we need to do is seek satisfaction in a relationship with Jesus, right?

If you're a Christian and you've been following Jesus for more than three minutes, you may be shocked by the title of this chapter. After all, if orthodox theology is defined by the best-selling Christian books and other media, the idea that Jesus doesn't want us to be satisfied is heresy.

While most Christians freely embrace the idea that the world doesn't satisfy (although most of us — including me — still face temptation to seek satisfaction in various ways in this world),



BOOK EXCERPT

many do believe the remedy is to seek satisfaction in a relationship with Jesus. And they believe that remedy will make their longings disappear. As long as we are in relationship with Jesus, he will fill that “God-shaped hole” inside us, and once that hole is filled, we will no longer ache with desire or longing or a nagging sense of dissatisfaction or spiritual suffering. We have no shortage of Christian pastors, teachers, and other leaders telling us this very thing. While the world doesn’t satisfy, they say, Jesus does.

The trouble is, while knowing and following Jesus has its priceless rewards and leads to complete satisfaction, it won’t deliver on this promise now. Sometimes obedience makes a person miserable. Sometimes it leads to suffering or even death. Yes, a relationship with God can bring comfort, peace, and even joy in such circumstances. But it may not bring satisfaction or happiness – at least in complete and lasting form.

It’s time to question this message.

– Taken from chapter one, “Jesus Doesn’t Want You to Be Satisfied . . . Yet”



Amy Simpson is an award-winning writer and the author of numerous books, including *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* and *Anxious*. She is a former publishing executive who has worked for Tyndale House Publishers, Group Publishing, Gospel Light, Standard Publishing, LifeWay, Focus on the Family, and *Christianity Today*. She is also a life and leadership coach. Simpson has published articles with *Christianity Today*, *Leadership Journal*, *Today's Christian Woman*, *Christian Singles*, *Group* magazine, *Relevant*, *Her.meneutics*, and others. She holds an English degree from Trinity International University and an MBA from the University of Colorado.

“It’s normal, and good, to be unsatisfied.”

Blessed Are the Unsatisfied looks at a common saying within Christianity: “this world won’t satisfy you but Jesus will.” Why did you want to write a book that counters that idea?

Amy Simpson: To be clear, I don’t intend to completely contradict that idea. It is essentially true – this world won’t satisfy us. And ultimately Jesus is the only one who can and will do so. But I do want to contradict the way this idea is often interpreted and applied within our culture. Many teachers and preachers offer this as a promise for here and now, suggesting to people that when they come into relationship with Christ, they will be completely satisfied and all their deepest longings will be fulfilled. And people are eager to believe a message like this, so it’s rarely questioned. But it’s not accurate, and perpetuating this idea is harmful to people and to the gospel.

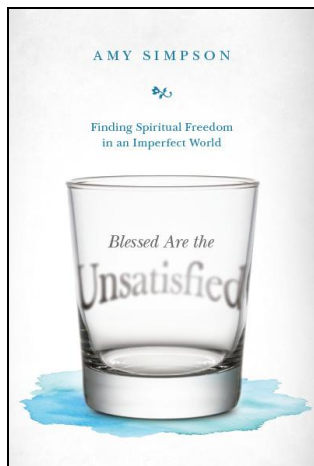
For one thing, telling people they should expect full satisfaction here and now sets them up for a crisis – or even failure – of faith. When people believe a relationship with Jesus will neutralize their hunger and thirst and make their longings disappear, they’re bound to be disappointed. That’s not what Jesus does for us. In fact, in many ways our lives become less satisfying as we know Christ more closely. We certainly can become less content to live with the barriers that still come between us and God. When people realize Christ has not delivered what they were hoping for, some simply decide Christianity “doesn’t work” and walk away. Faith in Christ is not a tool we put to use in our lives to see if it will make us happy, but we give people permission to approach it that way when we make these kinds of promises.

What does God want for us, if not satisfaction on earth?

I want everyone to know that it’s normal, and good, to be unsatisfied with what we can experience in this life. We have not yet achieved heaven, and God does not expect us to believe we have. He wants us to long for complete reconciliation with him, the lifting of the curse on this world, the full redemption of all creation, and life in God’s physical presence. God does not stigmatize our lack of satisfaction the way we do. Some of the people God considers most blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness. He rewards those who seek him, who are driven by an ongoing sense of longing. Revelation 7 paints an incredible picture of people reaching heaven and drinking deeply from springs of living water. Finally their hunger and thirst will be fully satisfied. I want us to live in this anticipation and let go of the pressure we place on ourselves, and others, to have achieved this now.

Why do you feel it’s important to be up front with our dissatisfaction?

Simpson: In the book, I draw a distinction between dissatisfaction – which is what you



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experience when you expect to be satisfied and aren't – and dissatisfaction, which is simply a lack of satisfaction. We can live peacefully unsatisfied, not expecting anything more (for now). This is what the book encourages people to do.

It's important to be honest and authentic about our lack of satisfaction because, for one thing, we have to live with it. We live in a world that lies under a curse, and every single one of us feels the distance between us and God and the life we were originally made for. Ignoring that gap won't make it go away. And if we're trying to avoid the truth of it, chances are it's dictating the way live, to some degree, because we're always stepping around it. When we face into it, we can find freedom, live with greater integrity, and stop distracting ourselves with the effort to find something we won't find.

There's also a lot of good news here! Acknowledging that we are unsatisfied puts us in position to enjoy the blessings that come with dissatisfaction. In his grace and goodness, God has taken a symptom of the curse and made blessings from it. So while our lack of satisfaction ultimately comes down to a consequence of human rebellion, God still allows us to experience good things in it.

You've written two books so far, one on depression and one on worry. How does *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied* connect with both *Troubled Minds* and *Anxious*?

Simpson: For one thing, this is another book I've written to express something God has been teaching me. He has done this partly through the experience of writing those other two books. Both raise important questions about what we should expect from life and how our faith sustains itself when life turns out to be something much different from what we long for. This book does the same.

Like *Troubled Minds*, the foundation for this book comes from my own experience as I was growing up. When you have a loved one with serious mental illness – in my case, my mother – it's difficult to buy into the idea that life – even life with Jesus – is all that we want and need it to be. Life is unpredictable, it's marked by repeated cycles of grief and loss, and palliative assurances break down pretty quickly. If your faith is to survive, it must be made of sterner stuff. It must be true and sustainable and able to thrive in the full light of reality. Life with my mom's illness has profoundly shaped my own faith, and it has informed all three of these books.

Partial motivation for writing this book came from my experiences in ministry since *Troubled Minds* was published. I travel and speak frequently on topics related to mental illness and how churches and individual Christians can help, and I share my own family's story. I also speak on *Anxious* and what it means to choose faith in a world of worry. Everywhere I go, I interact with people whose mental health challenges, emotional struggles, or circumstances have caused a crisis of faith. Some are desperate to understand how their faith can make everything okay, and they believe that's what they have been promised. Others are deeply

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disappointed with God because they are painfully unsatisfied and they expected a relationship with Christ to insulate them from this kind of hardship. And still others have walked through the wilderness to a place of profound peace and contentment. They can acknowledge life is not what they want it to be, and they are not who they want to be. They cling to the Source of life and liberation, fully acknowledging that they will not be satisfied until they are remade and living in God's presence, able to see him clearly. I have learned a lot from their example, and I would love to see many others living in the kind of spiritual freedom they enjoy.

What kind of research does *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied* tap into?

Simpson: In both my writing and my coaching work, I pay close attention to what science is discovering about our brains, what social science tells us about how people thrive, and how research supports the benefits of living a faith-filled life under the guidance of God's Word. This kind of research tends to show up in my writing, and it certainly appears in *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied*. For example, I look at what research tells us about how unrealistic expectations and disappointment hurt us. I describe what scientists have learned about how happiness can actually hurt us. And I highlight the power of delayed gratification.

You write that this book is about sustainable faith. What do you mean by that?

Simpson: In the book I call it "a faith that can survive, and even thrive, when life is really hard." Essentially it means our faith does not require us to destroy something else — like our ability to acknowledge reality, our intellect, or our humility before God — for its survival. If you think about sustainability in the context of agriculture, it means what you're growing doesn't come at a cost too great to make it worthwhile. A sustainable faith is one that does not require us to change the habitat to keep it alive. It can survive and thrive through hardship, it can sustain itself without props, and it is not dependent on our circumstances or our feelings. It can peacefully coexist with the reality of what our world is, and the reality of who we are.

What is one thing you want your readers to take away from *Blessed Are the Unsatisfied*?

Simpson: I hope people will find that this book contains a very hopeful message. For a lot of people, the idea that we won't be satisfied in this life sounds like bad news. And to a degree, it is — it is based in the reality that we live under the curse caused by human sin. But I hope readers will recognize good news here too. To me, it's very good news to remember that the life I live now is not the best I can hope for. The degree to which I can know God is nothing like as good as it gets. I don't have to convince myself this is enough; I can embrace my lack of satisfaction because I have so much hope in what is to come. And when we do that, we find freedom to live well as unsatisfied people. We can let go of our quest for satisfaction and choose a life that is meaningful, enjoyable, fulfilling, and content. We can appreciate the ways God blesses us through our unsatisfied condition.