

HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND THE LOVE OF GOD
Study Guide

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HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND THE LOVE OF GOD

Study Guide

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Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Outline Summary

I. Series Introduction: What Happiness Means to You



Episode Timecode

1:08

The Mystery of Unhappiness

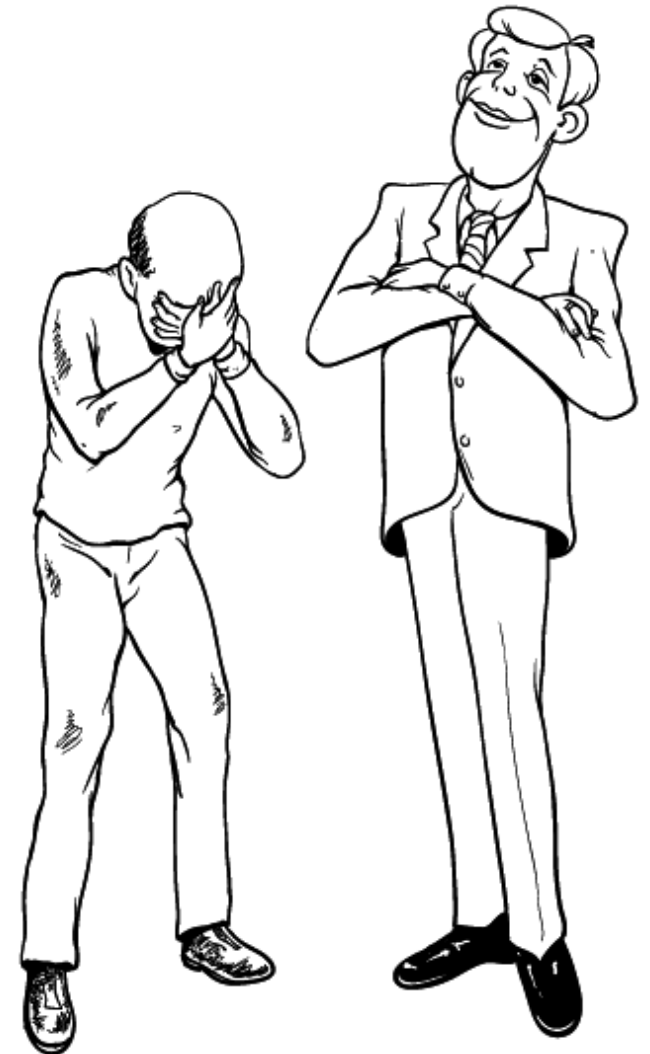
What does it take to be happy?

Sometimes people seem to have everything they could ever want, but they are still unhappy. Maybe you or someone you know has desired something for a long time, but then—unexpectedly—still felt empty after getting it.

We all want to avoid being unhappy, but often we don't seem to know how—or, since we live in a world with evil and suffering, if it's even possible.

It's strange that we need happiness so much and can still know so little about what it is. This series is dedicated to helping you understand more deeply what happiness is and examine how you are pursuing happiness in your own life.

NOTES



Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Giving Your Best vs. Being Better

So how can Level 3 be different? Instead of asking, “Am I better than others?”, the contributive drive in Level 3 makes us ask, “Did I use whatever I had to do as much good as I could?”

The happiness that comes from doing as much good with our lives as we can isn’t threatened by whether others can do more or less.



Viktor Frankl
(1905–1997)

Psychiatrist and philosopher

Best known for his 1946 book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, detailing his own experience in the Nazi concentration camps and the search for purpose in existence even under the darkest conditions.

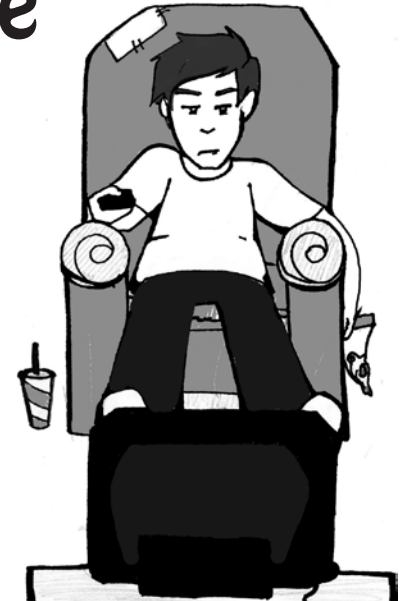


Contributive Happiness



- Doing
- Being With

vs.



- Disengaged
- Loneliness

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Lesson Two—The Comparison Game

Outline Summary

I. Which Level of Happiness Is Dominant?

The four levels of happiness are interconnected, and there is a natural progression moving up the four levels. However, one of the four levels is going to be most dominant in a person's life.

Review of the Four Levels

Level 1:

Getting pleasure from something else

Level 2:

Ego-boosting

Level 3:

Making a contribution and leaving a legacy

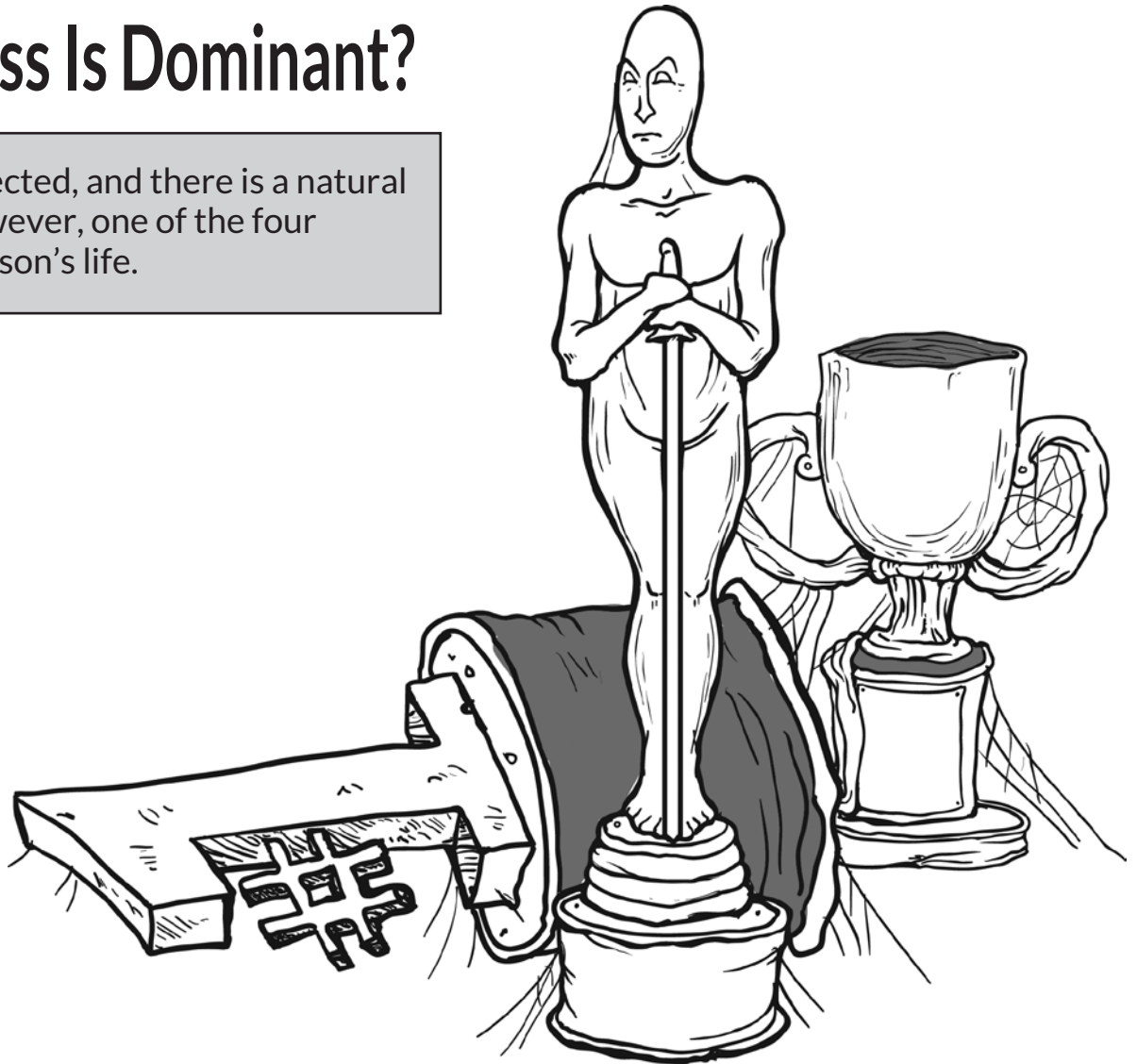
Level 4:

Finding ultimate purpose and eternal destiny, leading us to the feeling of "home"



EGO

The self (from the Latin for "I"). It can also refer to an inflated sense of self or focus on self; hence, a proud person has a big "ego".



Lesson Two—The Comparison Game

In-Between

Realistically, this is the largest group, because we all have good qualities and are all imperfect—nobody can be at their best (or even at their worst) all of the time. Plus, with so many people and so many achievements to pursue, no one can be best at everything or forever. (Even an Olympic gold medalist can feel insecure about, say, a bad singing voice.)

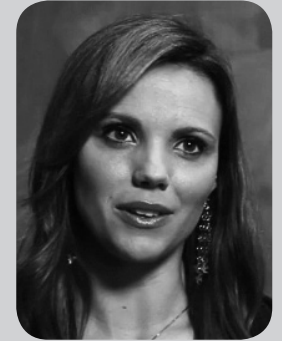
People in-between have moments of inferiority, followed by moments of superiority, followed by moments of inferiority. They share the problems of both groups—one minute they feel the pressure and narcissism of the winner, the next they feel the jealousy and victimization of the loser. They're always questioning themselves and afraid others will start questioning them too.



Leah Darrow
(Living)

Catholic speaker, former model

She launched her career as a model after appearing on the reality show “America’s Next Top Model”. She then left the fashion world and became an advocate for Catholic causes after a moment of conversion during a photo shoot.



There Are No Real Winners

Each of these groups is trapped—by depression, by pressure, by self-doubt. No one wins the Comparison Game. The only way to find happiness is to escape.

NOTES

Lesson Two—The Comparison Game

Positive Effects

When this new perspective leads to empathy, you get out of yourself. If you look for the good news repeatedly, it becomes a habit and starts to take you out of the narcissism, the depression, and the self-absorption of the Comparison Game.



EMPATHY

The ability to understand how someone is feeling, to see things from their perspective, and thus to appreciate and have care for their condition.



IDIOSYNCRASY

An unusual mannerism or behavior that is peculiar to one person.

Examples of Level 3 Contributions

- Spending more time with my friends
- Spending more time with my children
- Finding ways to help people who are struggling
- Helping out at a community center
- Volunteering in the community
- Volunteering in my church
- Championing a political cause

NOTES

Lesson Two—The Comparison Game

IV. The Four Levels Are a Progression



Episode Timecode
22:01

We speak of the “four levels of happiness”, not “four kinds of happiness”, because they are a progression. We are naturally supposed to build from one level to the next.

NOTES

This is why the Comparison Game and a life of pleasure cause trouble—not because they are embracing Level 1 or Level 2 happiness, but because they interrupt the natural growth that should develop and instead freeze us at these lower levels.

We can see the progression of the four levels in several ways.

Broader Effects

Pleasures of Level 1 tend to be limited in effect to ourselves. The effects of Level 2 and Level 3 are more pervasive, reaching others in society. Indeed, Level 3 is specifically focused on reaching out to the community. The effects of Level 4, as we will see, extend the farthest—beyond this world, in fact.

More Enduring

In addition to being broader, the effects extend further in time as you move up the levels. Level 1 pleasures don’t last once they are experienced. (Eat a fine meal, and a few hours later you’re hungry again.) The effects of Level 2, such as getting an education, or Level 3, such as helping others in need, can last through your whole life. The transcendent effects of Level 4 extend into eternity.

“Deeper”

The higher levels of happiness engage a person on a “deeper” level—your highest intellectual, creative, and psychological powers. Your intelligence, your ability to love, and your awareness of the spiritual and of the infinite all come into play more as you move from pleasure to competition to contribution to transcendence.

Lesson Two—The Comparison Game

V. Conclusion

Humans vs. Animals

Our constant striving for the transcendentals—truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home—radically separates us from all the other animal species.

Animals are content with what they are given. They are only active when their senses are awakened by an opportunity to fulfill an instinctual need—food, shelter, reproduction, or herd activity. When an animal's basic needs are met, they fall asleep.

Animal Needs

- Food
- Shelter
- Reproduction
- Herd Activity

When a human's basic needs are met, they spend their time thinking, imagining, creating, and striving for more.

This is why the levels of happiness become progressively more pervasive, enduring, and deep—none of us really want to be superficial, to live for immediate gratification, to be reduced to the level of an animal. We want to make the most of our thoughts and actions, the most of our lives.



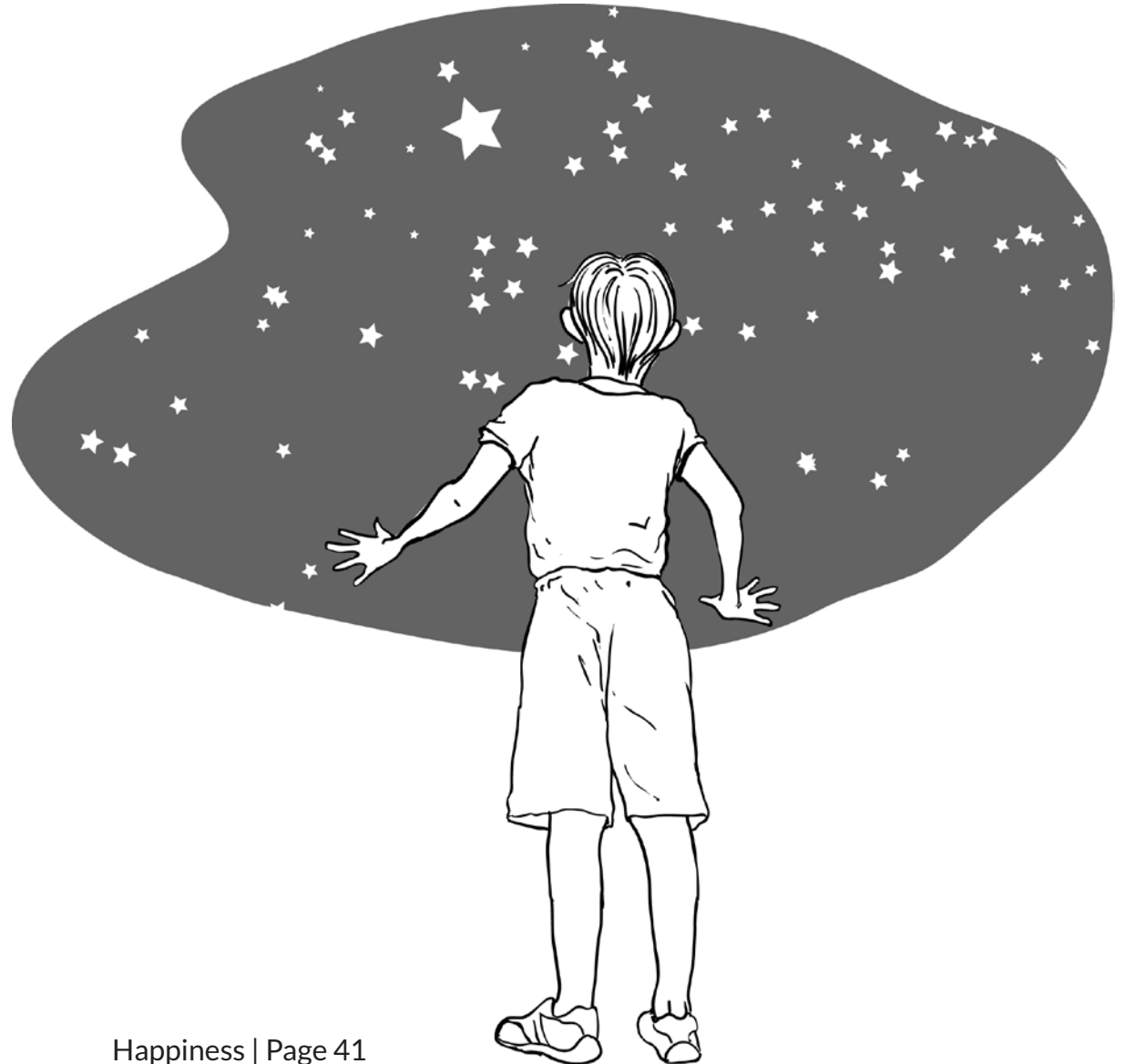
Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence

Outline Summary

I. The Benefits of Level 3

Even though it may seem easy to get stuck in the pursuit of pleasure or status, every person has deeper needs that call them to higher levels of happiness. It can be difficult to overcome habits that focus on the lower levels, but the effort brings us closer to our true self and gives us a liberating and renewed sense of our real purpose.

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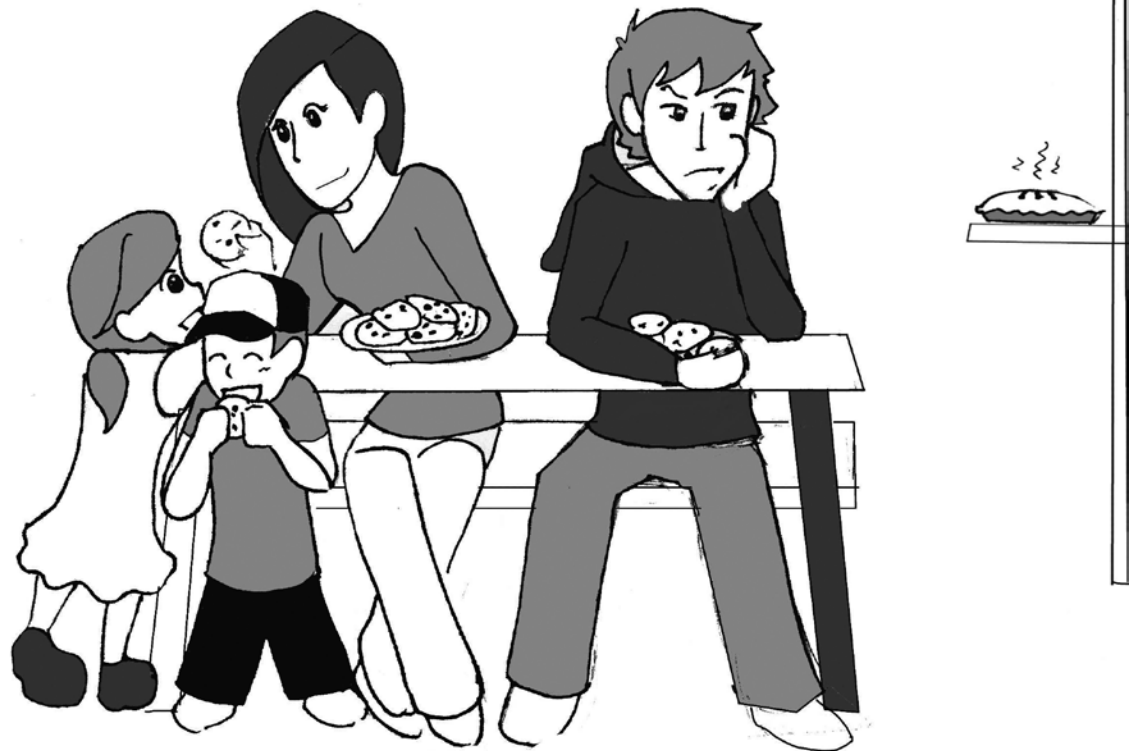
Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence

NOTES

Gratitude—Looking for the “Good News” in Our Whole Lives

Gratitude for what we have been given frees us to see the positive side of life. Grateful people try to help others, and this open, outward-looking disposition means they naturally adopt the life of contribution.

Ingratitude, by contrast, makes us closed off, grasping at what we have and being jealous of others. This disposition makes it harder to enjoy what we have and closes us off from the higher levels of happiness.



Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence



Episode Timecode

2:38

Case Study: Eduardo Verástegui

Born in a small town in Mexico, Eduardo Verástegui had a meteoric rise to fame, touring internationally in a boy band by age 19. Upon moving to the United States, he won a leading film role with a major studio in his very first English-language audition, and was simultaneously hired by Jennifer Lopez to appear in her music video.

It felt as if he was living the American Dream, and he was confused to discover that, in the midst of his success, he still felt empty.

A couple providential encounters, first with an English teacher and later with a priest, opened him up to the role of faith. His teacher confronted him with deeper questions, such as these:

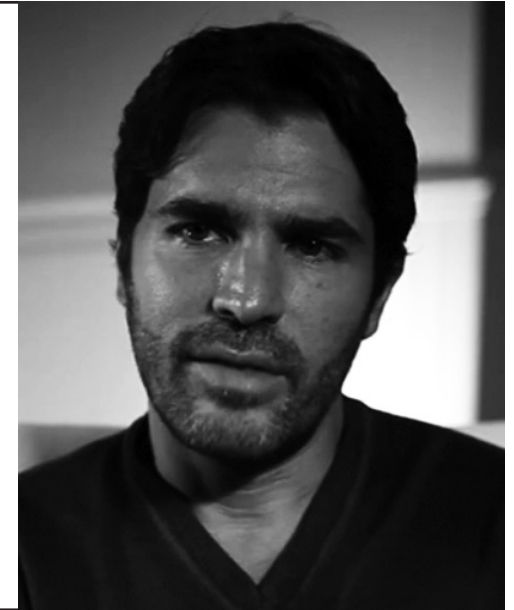
- What is the purpose of life?
- How are you using your talents?
- Who is God in your life?
- Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?

Eduardo realized that in his media appearances he was not serving as a good role model; previously he had not even considered his responsibilities, because of his Level 2 focus on his success and fame. He made the move from the Comparison Game to a life of contribution, making a promise not to do anything as a performer to offend his faith, his family, or his Latino culture.

This promise meant a great career sacrifice—none of the roles offered him in the next *four years* met this new standard, and he turned them all down.

He was facing the end of his career, but he was okay with it. He had lost everything, but had found everything that matters. Replacing his career, his faith now slowly became the center of his life.

He had a new purpose in his life—to give himself completely to God, who had created him with a mission. The anxiety and fear he used to live with were replaced with peace and trust in God.



“From now on, I only want to be in projects that will make the world a better place.”

—Eduardo Verástegui

Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence

Five Transcendentals

Since the time of Plato, philosophers have reflected on five desires that seem to be almost inexhaustible. We desire these things in a perfect form.

- **Truth**

Human beings want to know everything about everything, and we know when we don't know everything about everything. In that case, where did we get a sense of everything about everything? It must have been placed in us—as Eddington says, “The light beckons ahead and the purpose surging in our nature responds.”

- **Love**

We want unconditional love, and we always know when love is not unconditional—when it is not perfect. But how can we always recognize imperfect love unless we have a sense of perfect love?

- **Goodness and Justice**

We live in a world of much injustice, and we are not content, because it fails to measure up to the sense of perfect justice we have inside us. Since perfect justice is not to be found in this world, where does that sense originate?

NOTES



Sir Arthur Eddington
(1882–1944)

Astronomer, physicist

An accomplished scientist in his own right, he also wrote many popular works explaining cutting-edge science such as the Theory of Relativity for the general public. Like John Lennox today, Eddington was also interested in exploring the interface of science with philosophy and religion.



Saint Thomas Aquinas
(1225–1274)

Philosopher, theologian

Best known for his encyclopedic works of theology, *Summa Theologica* and *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas was a leader in exploring the interface of faith and reason, working to integrate classic philosophy (primarily through Aristotle) with Christianity's teachings on God and religious questions.



UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Love directed toward someone without any reservation whatsoever—it does not decline over time, in difficult circumstances, or if either person changes, and it does not need to be earned. Thus it has no conditions and is unconditional.

Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence

- **Beauty**

Think how much of the Comparison Game is fueled by the constant pursuit of perfect beauty. In the Comparison Game, this desire is always frustrated. But if perfect beauty is elusive in this world, where is it to be found? Where does that desire come from?

- **Home**

One of the striking benefits of the gift of faith, as seen in the case studies we've looked at, is the confidence and security faith brings. These people of faith know where they are going. They have an answer to the yearning found in song and story throughout human history for a more perfect place, a land where we truly belong, a lost paradise.

Desire Comes from God's Perfection

It seems, then, that we have five ideas of the perfect and unconditional within us that we could have never gotten from our brains and the world. The only source seems to be the very ideas themselves. That is why Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and modern philosophers such as Maritain, Lonergan, Adler, Rahner, and many others believe that God is present to us.



Jacques Maritain
(1882–1973)

Philosopher

Much of his work is devoted to continuing Aquinas' integration of faith and reason in the fields of modern philosophical and scientific study.



Mortimer Adler
(1902–2001)

Philosopher

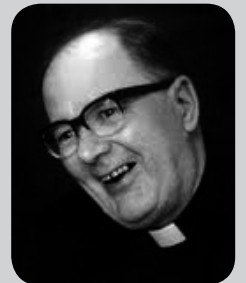
A modern student of Aristotle and Aquinas, he wrote books intended for a mass audience on issues such as freedom, human nature, and religion.



Bernard Lonergan
(1904–1984)

Priest, philosopher

His writings seek to integrate modern scientific thought and the principles of Christianity, similar to what Aquinas did with the natural philosophy of his time.



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Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence



Episode Timecode

38:20

Man's Primordial Invitation to the Transcendent

The Universal “Idea of the Holy”

Almost everyone around the world is intensely religious (currently 84 percent of the human population is, and even that number is historically low). So universal is this human behavior, that philosophers have been led to study why. Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade are among the philosophers who have studied how religion is a part of our lives. The experience of religion throughout the world seems to share an internal and external component.



PRIMORDIAL

From the very beginning, fundamental.



NOTES

Lesson Three—The Faith to Reach Transcendence

External Expression

This numinous experience does not remain merely internal. People throughout the world who encounter this experience also sense that a greater reality has broken into our world and extended us an invitation. Hence, the movement to worship takes on external forms: a church, rituals, symbols, a religious community. Time and again, religious traditions invoke the image of a final banquet, a wedding feast or some sort of communal celebration. Ultimately, we share this transcendent experience as a community.

Episode Timecode
36:19



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Lesson 4—Level 4 Evidence: Near-Death Experiences

Outline Summary

But is this true? We need to know if God exists and if the life after death that people feel called to is real.

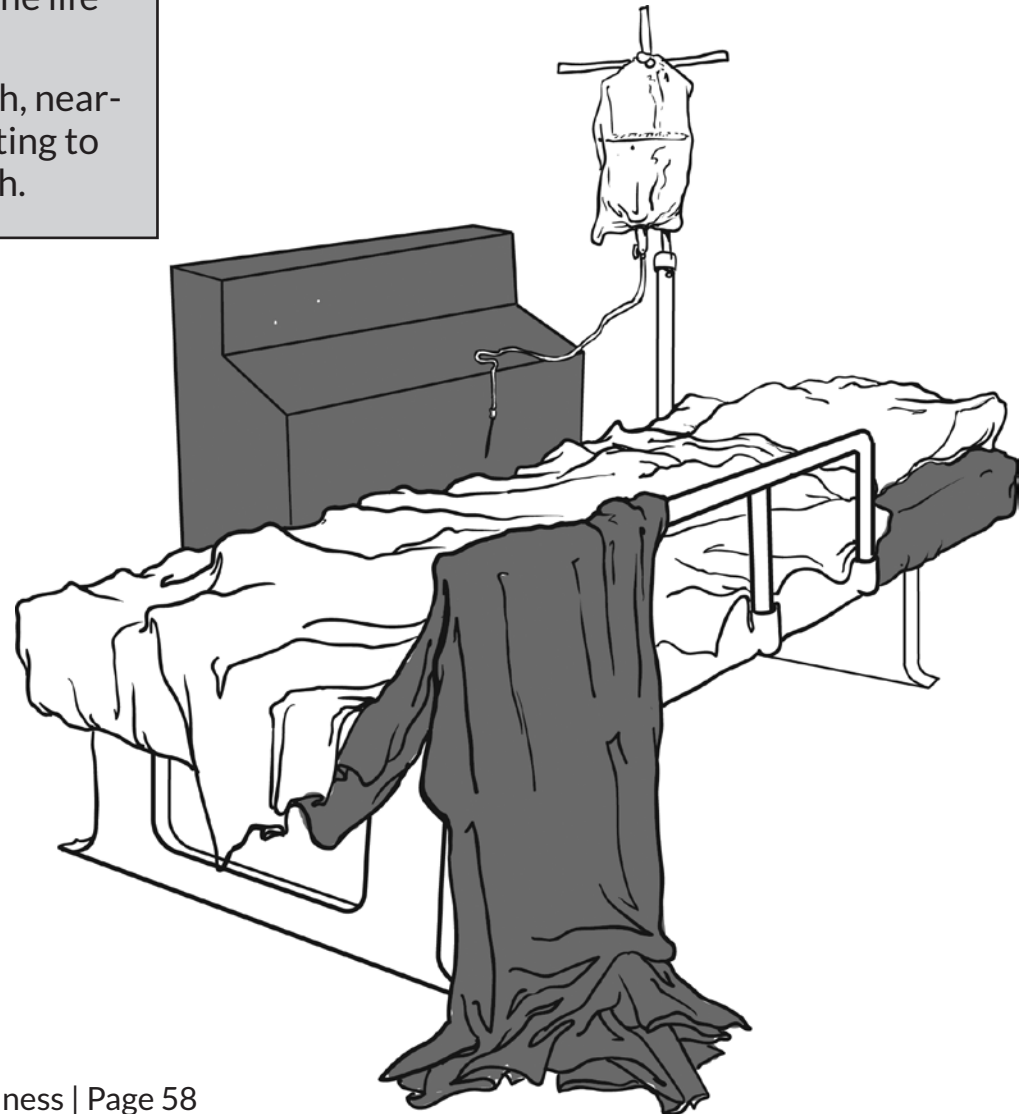
When we are looking at evidence for life after death, near-death experiences can provide medical evidence pointing to the survival of human consciousness after bodily death.

I. What Is a Near-Death Experience?

In thousands of clinically monitored cases of clinical death, the patients have reported a similar phenomenon, what we now call a near-death experience. Several basic elements recur across these reports.

Awareness Outside Their Body

For the typical patients, the experience begins with the consciousness leaving the body—often described as going through a tunnel and coming out—and hovering over the body, so they can “see” their body as well as the activity going on around it in the hospital. They are fully aware—not only able to sense things by seeing and hearing, but able to recall past memories and to remember the events they have witnessed while unconscious (and to recount them afterward, as we will see below).



Lesson Four—Level 4 Evidence: Near-Death Experiences

Experiencing the Transcendent

This awareness transcends the normal sense experiences of daily life in several ways:

1. Free from Physical Laws

The person's consciousness in these reports is not subject to physical laws during the experience:

They can pass through walls.

They can move up in the air unrestrained by gravity.

They can move with inordinate speed.

2. Moving to Another World

Many report moving from this world altogether, into another world that is transcendent, beautiful, and peaceful.

3. Encountering Others

Those who move into this other world frequently see deceased relatives and friends. These loved ones are transformed from how they were in life:

They are youthful (even if they died old).

They seem to have a spiritual quality.

They manifest extraordinary wisdom, peace, and love.

They are recognizably themselves, however, and will greet and converse with the person.

NOTES



NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Phenomena reported by people who have seen and experienced things while they were clinically dead (and thus incapable of sensing anything with their physical senses or brain).

Overwhelming Love

Perhaps the most well-known pattern in these reports is the white light that people encounter, a light that is incredibly bright but does not cause pain. The light is filled with overwhelming love and seems to know everything about the person. Some people, particularly children, see Jesus.

Lesson Four—Level 4 Evidence: Near-Death Experiences

Blind People in Near-Death Experiences: Dr. Kenneth Ring

Episode Timecode
3:07

A controlled scientific study of the near-death experiences of blind people revealed that the blind experienced sight during their experience just as others did. Many of these people were blind from birth, and thus had no prior experience of sight, which they reported as being initially disorienting (though often deeply moving as well) during the near-death experience.

Here, then, is a form of sensory awareness that is not only inexplicable during clinical death, but goes beyond the physical abilities of the patient's brain during normal life.



VERIDICAL DATA

Data that can be verified after the fact by the observations of a third party. Such data, as a rule, is concerned with facts about the documentable physical world.



Dr. Kenneth Ring (Living)

Medical doctor and psychiatrist

He authored the study on near-death experiences of blind people, primarily the blind from birth. He received his doctorate from UCLA and became a professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut, where he has catalogued near-death experiences through controlled scientific studies.



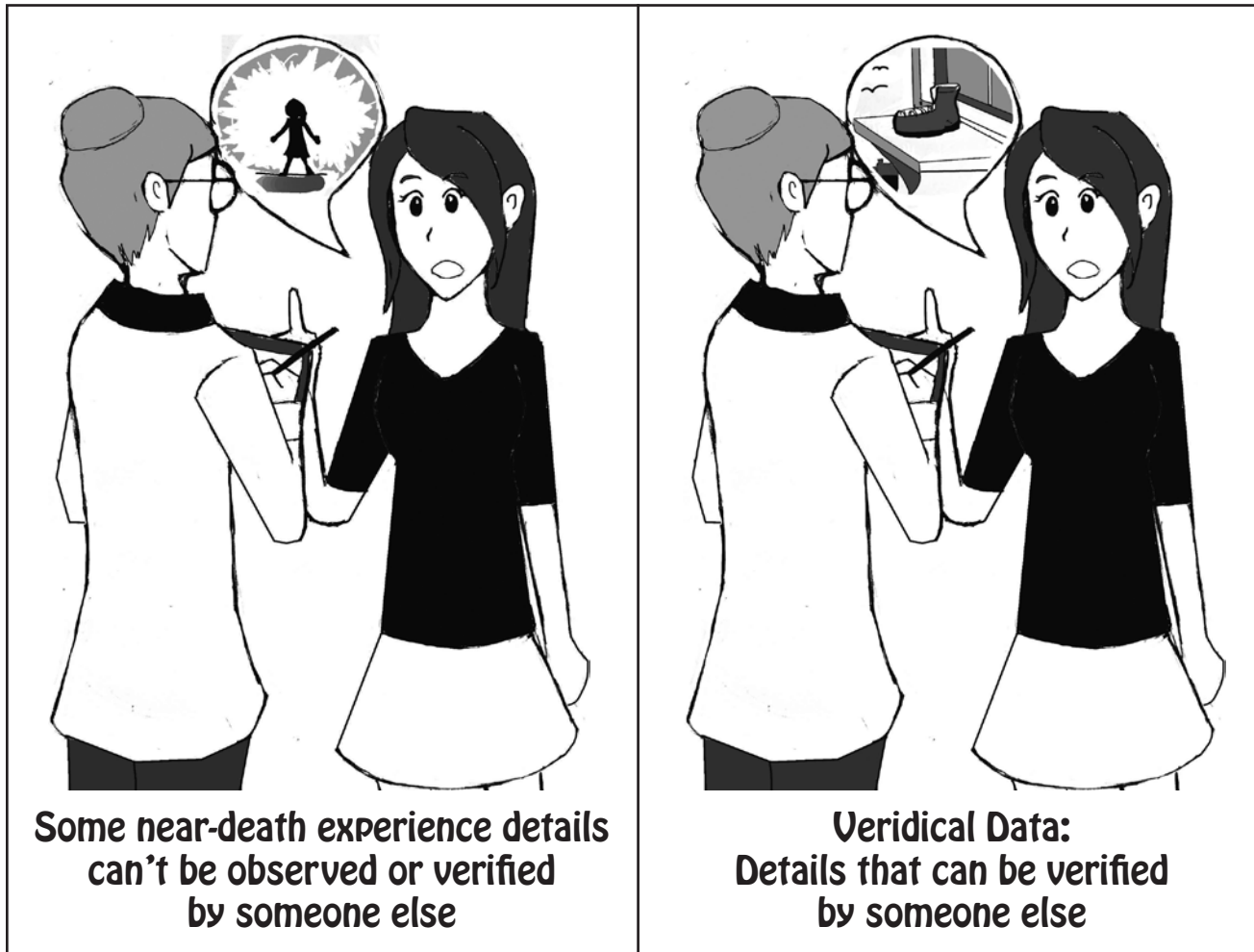
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Lesson Four—Level 4 Evidence: Near-Death Experiences

Veridical Data—A Study of Studies

Episode Timecode
17:28

Veridical data refers to data that can be verified after the fact by the observations of a third party. While many elements of a near-death experience take place in an unreachable world and cannot be verified directly by observation, the things that people witness in this world and remember afterward can be verified. Dr. Holden took thirty-seven clinically controlled studies and made a study of the veridical data in all 37 of them (which spanned hundreds of cases).



She found that the veridical data was reported more accurately by the clinically dead than by the other people in the hospital room. In some cases, the details being reported and independently verified involved distant or inaccessible areas of the hospital, or conversations overheard while the brain was being actively monitored and failing to register activity.

Again, we see conscious activity that exceeds not only the limitations of the clinically dead but the physical abilities of the healthy.

NOTES

IV. Conclusion



Episode Timecode
24:11

The Evidence of Near-Death Experiences

The veridical data, the vision of blind people, and the many highly monitored and controlled studies of near-death experiences make it difficult to deny the existence of a transphysical soul: a soul that survives bodily death and can see, hear, remember, think, feel—and even transcend the laws of physics.

Another important suggestion from these studies is the existence of a transphysical world: a world where the deceased live transformed. This world is overseen by a loving white light that reveals the loving nature of the afterlife.

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The Personal Implications of a Soul

The existence of the soul is not simply an academic or scientific question.

How does it change your life if you know you are going to endure beyond death? How do you treat other people if every one of them is destined for a transcendent existence? How do the difficulties and even the despair you may sometimes face in life change, if there is something more that comes after this life altogether? The existence of a transcendent world, a loving destiny beyond this life, is of great personal importance. We have seen the evidence of near-death experiences—in the next lesson we will examine a different source of evidence.

Lesson Four—Level 4 Evidence: Near-Death Experiences



SMALL GROUP REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does it matter whether or not we have a consciousness that survives death?
2. What similarities do the near-death experiences described in this chapter share?
3. What physical explanations are proposed for near-death experiences during clinical death? What counterarguments are given?
4. How would you treat a “clump of molecules” differently from a “transcendent being”? How do you see yourself?
5. What aspects of near-death experiences point to a God of unconditional love?
6. What is a time in your life when you felt called to unconditional love? What is a time in your life when you felt you weren't called to anything, or felt despair? What can you learn from comparing them?
7. If God is calling you to an eternal life in unconditional love, what does that say about how you should relate to others?
8. How does having a soul affect the way you view your self-worth, and the self-worth of others?
9. How does your destiny after death (and whether you have one at all) affect the way you live your life?

NOTES

Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

Outline Summary

We looked at near-death experiences and the evidence they show about the soul and the afterlife. These correlate with the teachings and Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus said the afterlife will be eternal and that we will be brought to a state of unconditional love. But Jesus offered a more direct support for his teaching in his own Resurrection. Naturally, much study has been done on the evidence for Jesus' Resurrection.

I. Saint Paul and the Resurrection's Witnesses

The List of Witnesses

The offering of evidence for Jesus' Resurrection begins with Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, written about 20 years later around A.D. 54. He gives an extensive list of witnesses who saw Jesus after the Resurrection, beginning with Saint Peter, then the other apostles, then five hundred disciples. He mentions that most of them are still living at that point, so readers can verify the story for themselves.

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Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

NOTES



Saint Paul
(d. A.D. 67)



Apostle

He preached the gospel of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire, establishing or strengthening Christian communities in many cities; fourteen of the letters he wrote to these communities are included in the New Testament.

Originally a persecutor of Christians, he famously underwent a conversion on the road to Damascus when the resurrected Christ appeared to him. He himself died for the Christian faith under a Roman persecution of Christianity.

Nothing to Gain, Everything to Lose

Saint Paul gives some context for the witnesses' stories, showing that they don't have anything to gain and a lot to lose by preaching the Resurrection.

Religious Liars?

First, if the witnesses believe in God and are lying about the Resurrection, then they are perjuring themselves and undermining their Jewish faith for a lie for which they risk eternal punishment.

Irreligious Liars?

Second, even if they don't believe in God, there were plenty of penalties in this world. They faced the loss of social status, financial status, and even outright persecution and death for preaching the Risen Jesus—when they supposedly knew there was no resurrection to look forward to.

Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

The Best Kind of Witness

Saint Paul's conclusion, of course, is that all these sacrifices the witnesses made are meaningless if they are lying. If there's no resurrection, you might as well "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Since they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by lying, it's more credible to believe they are telling the truth, since they have no incentive to make up the story.

The same techniques are used in our court systems today. Attorneys will try to prove that their witness has nothing to gain.

NOTES

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that **he was raised on the third day** in accordance with the Scriptures, and that **he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.**

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.”

— Saint Paul, *First Letter to the Corinthians* 15:3–6

Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

II. Modern Historical Investigation



Episode Timecode

4:17

In modern times, historians have honed careful techniques for evaluating the historicity of events. These techniques, called “criteria for

historicity”, have been brought into New Testament studies by many scholars, such as Joachim Jeremias and Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J. These have brought to light some striking facts surrounding the historicity and impact of the Resurrection.



Joachim Jeremias
(1900–1979)

Scripture scholar

He focused on the study of early Hebrew texts that would help reconstruct the historical context of Jesus’ life.



HISTORICITY

The existence of something in history, as distinguished from a myth, legend, or other fiction.

NOTES

Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

The Messianic Movement

The Life Cycle of a Messiah

Due to the political turmoil in Judea at the time of Jesus, there were actually several Messianic movements. Every time one of these messiah figures was humiliated and publicly executed by the government, the movement would simply die away, no matter what steps were taken by followers to try to keep it going.

The Growth of Christianity

Christianity, instead of disappearing, actually exploded in growth at such a rapid rate that in a few generations it would become the state religion of the empire that was trying to persecute it.

The Difference—the Resurrection of Jesus

It's hard to imagine a more striking way Christianity could go against the pattern of Messianic movements. What was the difference? The execution of a messiah meant failure and proved they did not have the power they claimed to change history.

The narrative is different if you have witnessed your Messiah rise from the dead. Preaching the Resurrection gave a reason to continue the movement, since Jesus had proven his power over death itself and his ability to keep his promise of eternal life to humankind. Indeed, he was still keeping it through the many miracles his disciples were performing in his name.

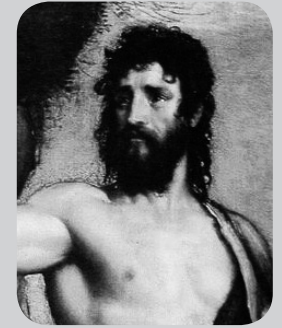
It explains the rapid growth in the face of persecution instead of rapid death. If the Resurrection was a lie, finding the motive that explains this growth becomes much harder.



Saint John the Baptist
(d. circa A.D. 31)

Prophet

He preached the coming of the Messiah and repentance through Baptism. He was imprisoned by King Herod and beheaded. After his death, some of his disciples became followers of Jesus, believing him to be the promised Messiah.



NOTES



Dr. Gary Habermas
(Living)

Scripture scholar

He received his doctorate from Michigan State in History and the Philosophy of Religion. The author of 35 scholarly books and over 100 scholarly articles concerning the historical Jesus, he is currently a research scholar at Liberty University.



Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

Mutations of Second Temple Judaism



Episode Timecode
10:49

This is another historical aberration that seems to verify the Resurrection. Second Temple Judaism refers to the Jewish doctrines that had been formulated since the building of the Second Temple in 515 B.C. These doctrines were still current in Judaism at the time of Jesus and of the early Christians.



Historical Model of the Second Temple

Christian Conformity

The early Christians were very respectful of the doctrines of Second Temple Judaism. They did not want to be separated from the synagogue, and so they tried to maintain continuity with this Jewish tradition as much as possible.

NOTES

Lesson Five—Level 4 Evidence: The Resurrection

III. Scholarly Consensus



Consensus in Survey of Scripture Scholars

A more recent case of doctrinal agreement is found in Dr. Habermas’ survey of Scripture scholars. He found that the majority of Scripture scholars today agree on these two principles:

1. **Historicity of Resurrection**—The Resurrection is a real historical event, not a story invented later.
2. **Transformed Spiritual Body**—Jesus rose with a transformed body.

Any Consensus Is Very Rare

It is unusual for these scholars, who hail from various denominations and beliefs, to reach consensus on a major doctrinal point such as this. Even those scholars who are personally agnostic or atheist acknowledge that the reports of the Resurrection can be credibly traced all the way back through history, to within a year of the event itself.

NOTES

“Eat, drink, and be merry,
for tomorrow we **die.**”

— Traditional saying describing the limits of life

“Behold, I tell you a **mystery:**
We shall not all sleep, but we
shall all be changed.”

— Saint Paul, *1 Corinthians 15:51*

IV. Conclusion: Why Does It Matter?



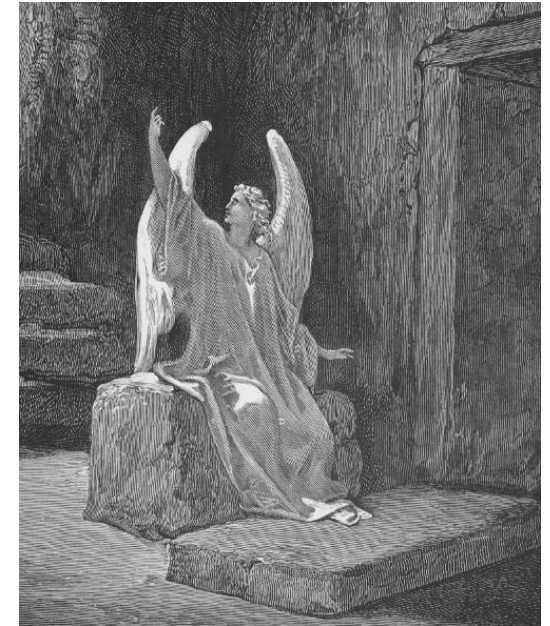
Life after Death

The historicity of Jesus' Resurrection is important on a personal level in the same way the evidence from near-death experiences was—when confirmed, it provides evidence of life after death, evidence that there is something transcendent about us beyond just our bodies, something that continues to live.

Jesus' Role

Moreover, Jesus promised that he would rise from the dead, and that we would as well. When he rose, it showed that he could keep his promises and that he knew what he was talking about.

If Jesus was right about the existence of our eternal future, what else was he right about? He preached a God of love and a transcendent afterlife that seems to match the evidence of the near-death experiences we've seen. The next lesson will examine more closely what He had to say about the way we ought to live our lives and now the loving Father waiting for us, and how this can bring ultimate good even out of the most difficult suffering in life, which leads us ultimately to transcendent happiness.



NOTES

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

Outline Summary

We have looked at several kinds of evidence for the existence of life after death. Both near-death experiences and the life and teaching of Jesus indicate that this afterlife will be characterized, not only by a spiritual body, but by love among all the people in the heavenly Kingdom.

For many people, though, even after the existence of God and the afterlife are established, the unconditional love of God and our destiny to share that love remains a question of its own. Is unconditional love real?

I. Skepticism about a Loving God

There are many sources of skepticism about God’s unconditional love. We live in a society of Murphy’s Law, where people presume that all good news is simply too good to be true. While the existence of God and the soul are challenging enough to a habitually skeptical culture, add the concept of “love”, and the skepticism intensifies.

NOTES



Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?



MURPHY'S LAW

An old adage to the effect of “Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.” It is often invoked in times of frustration or cynicism about life, though it also can be invoked more positively as a justification for careful and thorough planning.



SKEPTICISM

A questioning or doubting attitude toward accepted truths. In daily life, it can also refer to a general attitude of distrust, incredulity, or suspicion.

God as Punishing Judge

Some people try to make Jesus into an administrator of strict justice and punishment. Many traditions and even popular culture seem to portray God’s call as one focused on retribution, on exacting guilt and condemnation. The evidence from Scripture (in addition to the evidence we’ve reviewed) points instead to a very different reality. For Jesus, mercy trumps justice and punishment, and his love is unconditional.

Love Is Not for Me

Others believe in a loving God, but cannot believe that they themselves are destined to receive love. Perhaps a formative experience has led them to believe that they are worthless or unlovable; or perhaps like the prodigal son they are focused on guilt for their past behavior, and seek to place conditions on God’s love. Whatever the cause, they think God’s love extends to everyone except them.

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II. Signs of Love in Near-Death Experiences



As we have seen, there is much evidence to indicate that God's love is real and unconditional. Part of this evidence is found in the witness of near-death experiences.

The Transcendent World

The existence of a transcendent world where life endures beyond death, where people are transformed into an uplifted, perfected version of their true selves, is reported time and again in these experiences.

The Light

All the encounters with the white light consistently report it as exceedingly loving. People come away from the experience with a strong sense of love.



NOTES

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

III. Signs of Love in Jesus



Episode Timecode
2:37

We previously looked at the evidence of Jesus' Resurrection, and how it would lend credibility to his teachings. These teachings consistently emphasize God's unconditional love, as does Jesus' whole proclaimed mission of sacrificing Himself to bring humankind to salvation.

From Intelligent Creator to Loving God

For people who recognize the scientific or philosophical evidence for the existence of a Creator, Father Spitzer draws a necessary connection between an intelligent Creator and a loving God.

The greatest power we have as creatures, the one power that can singlehandedly bring meaning and fulfillment to our lives, the one power that can never be used for evil motives, is love. If we have this power as creatures, it is difficult to hold that our Creator lacks this power. Our Creator must be loving. We know this love is unconditional through a similar line of thought—the love that we desire isn't just any love, it's perfect love. (Love is one of the transcendental desires.) Again, can we assign a lesser power to the Creator of the universe than perfect love? When we consider that the Creator who loves us gave us the desire for unconditional love, it would be inconsistent to hold that he would leave that desire unfulfilled.

By now, it makes sense that an all-powerful Creator who loves us unconditionally would want to be with us, to give himself to us, to come down to us and connect with us in a face-to-face relationship. It only remains to be asked: Is Jesus the One? Is Jesus in fact the appearance of the loving God whom we are already expecting?

NOTES

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

The Prodigal Son



Episode Timecode
12:58

One of the key teachings of Jesus on God’s unconditional love is found in the story he told, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is Jesus’ consummate revelation of who God the Father is (whom he called “Abba”—affectionate and understanding “Daddy”). Notice that the father in the story is Jesus’ image of God the Father. The story concerns a son who demands his share of his father’s wealth and then leaves home and recklessly spends it all—betraying and shaming his family, country, religion, and God himself. In first-century Jewish terms, this son is about as bad as anyone could be. Driven to starvation, he resolves to go home, beg his father’s forgiveness, and be consigned to the status of a slave.

The father—who represents God the Father—sees him coming, and instead of renouncing him for his conduct and betrayal, he rejoices and rushes to embrace him.



PARABLE

Story told to illustrate a teaching or moral.



PRODIGAL

To spend wealth excessively or wastefully; spendthrift.



ABBA

The Aramaic word for “Father”, and the word used by Jesus in the New Testament when he preached that we should call God our Father. Most notably used in the popular prayer Jesus taught, the “Our Father”.

Before the son can finish his speech, the father orders the servants to get a cloak and put it on him (indicating that he wants his son to be treated as royalty). He then asks them to bring his son sandals (to take care of his temporal needs), and then to bring the family ring. The ring is very important, because it contains the signet or sign of the family, indicating that his son belongs to the family 100 percent—no conditions, qualifications, or reservations. He then orders that the fattened calf be killed, and a celebration begins.

For Jesus, this is how God welcomes and restores every single person—even the most gravely sinful—if they but return to the Father and ask for his forgiveness.

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

And the son said to him, “‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’

And they began to make merry.”

— From the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Gospel of Luke 15:21–24

NOTES

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

IV. Competing Views of God: The Problem of Hell

Episode Timecode
25:38

Jesus' portrayal of God as a Father with unconditional love for us can seem hard to reconcile with his talk of eternal torment, of being cast out into Gehenna, of wailing and grinding of teeth. These seem to be two contradictory views of God. The doubt returns—is God in fact indifferent to us?

Our Freedom to Reject God

The existence of Hell is not based on God's destiny for us. There has to be some accommodation for Hell because God respects our freedom. So if we want to reject Him, reject others, and reject love, then God has to provide some domain in which people who want to spend eternity being like this can do it.

Hell Is a Place to Be Away from Heaven

Such people certainly cannot do this in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is unconditional love. If God grants us all eternal life, there has to be a place for people who want to reject God, others, and love that can't be the same as the Kingdom of Heaven. They need a place where they can have what they want.

NOTES



GEHENNA

Originally the name of a valley used by pagan tribes for child sacrifice and hence seen as cursed land, its meaning expanded in the Bible to refer to the place of eternal absence from God, of darkness, and of torment. In this meaning it is synonymous with the modern English "Hell".



"WAILING AND GRINDING OF TEETH"

This unusual biblical phrase is typically found in parables, describing those "cast out" into darkness or Gehenna. "Wailing" is often used in Scripture to indicate lamentation (think of the feeling in English of phrases such as "lamenting his fate" or simply "woe is me!"). Grinding of teeth is used throughout the bible to depict anger. The combination suggests a specific kind of emotion—self-pity and anger—the emotion one might find in someone throwing a tantrum or, more seriously, a person who has closed himself off from any outside love or healing.



AUTONOMOUS

Self-governing, in control of itself, independent, not answerable to anyone.

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

The Choice of Isolation

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis illustrates the mindset of people who choose Hell by describing Hell as a place where all the houses move further and further away from each other over the years. People get sick and tired of being around other people and all prefer splendid isolation. They can all be completely autonomous; they don't have to listen to anyone, help anyone, or even be with anyone.

They are each king of their own empty domain, forever, just as they want.

God Welcomes All to Heaven

While people may choose this isolation of Hell, God always welcomes and invites everyone to Heaven. This doesn't mean we need to be perfectly loving when we die. It does mean we have to want to be in an environment where God, others, and love, not only matter, but are of ultimate significance. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola says, even the desire to have the desire will do—such was the attitude of the prodigal son. God can take care of the rest.



THE GREAT DIVORCE

(1945) A fantasy written by C. S. Lewis, set on an allegorical bus trip from Hell to the outskirts of Heaven, that explores human choices and how they influence our openness to salvation and happiness.

NOTES

God's invitation to salvation is always the same.



Every person has the freedom to open themselves to it or to be alone.

Lesson Six—Transcendence: Is Unconditional Love Real?

V. Competing Views of God: The Problem of Evil

Another conflict people perceive with a loving God is why He would allow evil. This is an old and universal question, and it has multiple facets.



LOVE

Capacity to see the good news in one another and to enter into an empathetic relationship, where it is just as easy to do the good for the other as it is for ourselves.



**Free acts can be loving
(like this parent holding a kid).**



**Involuntary acts cannot be loving
(like this chair holding a kid).**

Why Does God Allow Human Evil?



Episode Timecode
25:38

Genuine Love Is Free

Why does God allow people to do evil? As with the problem of Hell, the question comes down to freedom. God gives us the power to love, and genuine love must be free. If you can't choose evil, you can't choose good.

Robot Love vs. Made in God's Image

The only alternative to freely given love would be forced love. If God didn't allow us to choose evil courses of action, then He would have to program us to do only loving behaviors. We would be like robots with a God chip, programmed to love.

God wants more for us than robotic "love" because we are made in God's image. We are persons; like God we have an intellect to know the truth and a free will to choose the good—to choose love freely, as God loves us freely.



Saint Ignatius of Loyola
(1491–1556)

Priest, theologian

Founder of the Jesuits, he was the author of the *Spiritual Exercises*, a system of self-examination and prayer that is still widely used today.



Lesson Seven—Happiness, Love, and Suffering

Outline Summary

I. The Problem of Suffering

In the last lesson, we considered suffering produced by human evil, but another kind of suffering remains: the suffering produced by the forces of nature.

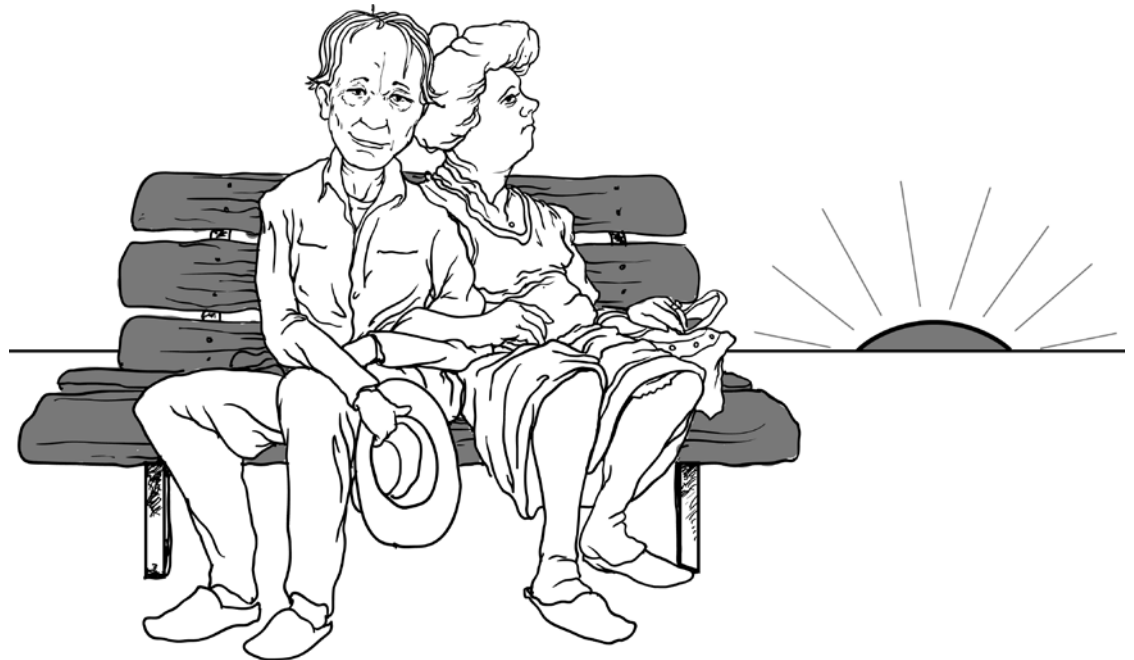
Why Does God Allow Suffering Caused by Nature?

Love Incompatible with Suffering

If God is all-loving, and suffering is incompatible with love, why did he create a natural world that could cause suffering? Why didn't he create us in a perfect world?

Suffering in Our Culture

This question of suffering weighs on the mind of many people today—this is the issue that leads many in our culture away from God. They can't believe that a God of love would allow suffering, and so they refuse to believe in God. They don't encounter the various kinds of evidence of a loving God, as we have surveyed in the preceding lesson. So when they can't answer the question of suffering, it leads them toward a "cruel God", which incites either indifference to or rejection of him. But there is a crucial flaw in the way they are asking the question—the assumption that love and suffering are incompatible.



NOTES

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

NOTES



RECIPROcity

A mutual exchange of privileges.

Storgē—Affection

Affection is a natural response to a delightful object. It is primarily emotional. *Storgē* is what is triggered when you encounter a laughing baby or a cute puppy, or the elderly neighbor who always smiles and waves when you pass by at the mailbox. This response may not run very deep, but it is nonetheless a valid form of love.



Filia—Friendship

Friendship is a higher level of love—it runs deeper than the affection we might feel for an acquaintance. What makes a friend more substantial than an acquaintance?



Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

Reciprocity

Friends are people you appreciate—something about their personality, or their presence makes you want to spend time with them, be loyal to them, be honest around them, and commit yourself to them. But all of this sharing of yourself anticipates a reciprocity—if the other person doesn't feel similarly drawn to you, the friendship will not grow, and it probably won't last long if it even begins.

Commitment

On the other hand, if the person does reciprocate and shares himself with you, then this mutual sharing engenders a commitment. You become invested in each other and are motivated to give more of yourself, in the expectation that your friend will do the same for you and that the friendship will grow. Really good friends feel that they would do just about anything for each other—they are loyal and committed. Note that this commitment is not exclusive or romantic.



COMPLEMENTARITY

A combination of things in a way that brings out the best qualities of each, such that they “complete” each other.



“FIRST PRIORITY” RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between two people who are each the most important priority in the other's life.

NOTES

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

Eros—Romance



Episode Timecode

2:30

Complex and Powerful

Romance is a combination of several strong and interrelated desires. *Eros* refers to more than simply biological sex. Sexuality is one element, as is the fascinating mystery of “the other gender”, the attraction of beauty, intimations of marriage and family, and the anticipation which comes from all these elements wrapped up together—an anticipation for the one person with whom you will bond in a “first priority” relationship.

The “First Priority” Relationship

We want to be the most important priority and relationship in another person’s life. This is what *eros* motivates us to seek, and it has built-in characteristics.

Mutual Exclusivity

Just as friendship requires reciprocity, even more so does a “first priority” relationship. If you are going to ask someone to make you the most important priority in their life, you also have to do the same for them. And since each person can only have one first priority, this means the relationship must be mutually exclusive.

Sharing the Whole Self

As a result, a mutual “first priority” relationship naturally orients itself toward a person we can share our whole self with: someone who will complement us, someone we can raise children with and grow old with, someone we can trust completely, and someone who will commit to us at the highest level. This complex psychological desire goes far beyond the simple elements, such as physical attraction or a desire for a family, yet these elements are all real and involved in this desire.



NOTES

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

“First Priority” Relationship

Someone We Can:

- Share our whole self with
- Raise children with
- Grow old with
- Trust completely
- Do things with that we can’t do by ourself
- Mutually support and complement

Agapē—Unconditional Love

Love without Reward

The three kinds of love so far involve a giving of oneself to another, and receiving something in return.

Storgē—affection and emotion

Filia—reciprocity and commitment

Eros—exclusive commitment and romance

The final and highest kind of love is **agapē**. *Agapē* is completely unselfish, focusing only on the goodness and value it sees in the other person in himself. It requires no reward.



“Greater Love Hath No Man . . .” —The Power of Agapē in the World

Many of the most valued expressions of love in our world come from *agapē*.

Agapē is the only kind of love that can initiate forgiveness, compassion for the marginalized, and sympathy for the sick. These are acts of love that don’t come with a reward attached to them.

You can see why Jesus established *agapē* as the highest kind of love. It is the love that can embrace the prodigal son with open arms and welcome him into the heavenly banquet.

NOTES



SELF-DEFINITION

Defining our character by our actions and choices.

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

The Four Levels of Love and Suffering

What we believe about happiness will determine how we define five other important concepts—love, suffering, freedom, ethics, and the common good. Just as there are four levels of happiness, so also there are four levels of these other concepts. The concept we are interested in here is “love”.

People on happiness Level 1 generally view love as the satisfaction of physical-sexual desires. People on happiness Level 2 view love as being loved and admired by others. People on Level 3 view love as contributing to, caring for, and attending to others—and working with others for a common good. On Level 4, love has the same characteristics as Level 3 but goes beyond *this world*—so it is contributing to, caring for, and attending to others’ faith, hope, salvation, and transcendent dignity and mystery.

Notice that *storgē* is possible on all four levels of love, because it is only a feeling. However, it is very difficult—if not impossible—to have meaningful *filia* (friendships), meaningful *eros* (“first priority” friendship and commitment), and *agapē* (self-sacrificial love for the good of the other alone) on Levels 1 and 2. These three kinds of love are available only for people living on Levels 3 or 4. If someone is living on Level 4. He will infuse his *filia*, *eros*, and *agapē* with concern for the other person’s eternal destiny, transcendent dignity, and salvation.

We are now in a position to see how love and suffering can be compatible. As you can imagine, suffering and love are completely incompatible for people who are dominant Level 1 or Level 2. Suffering can’t possibly fulfill someone’s physical-sexual desires (Level 1) or one’s desire to be loved and admired by others (Level 2). However, suffering can have an essential positive influence on Level 3 love, because it can help people to seek deeper meaning in life, humility, courage, virtue, compassion, and care for others. Furthermore, the suffering of others creates the opportunity for us to respond to them with care, compassion, humility, and courage. Similarly, suffering helps people living on Level 4 to trust radically in God, seek their eternal destiny and transcendent dignity as their first priority, and seek God’s grace through prayer. This trust, grace, and transcendent perspective enhance and fortify our unselfish care for and compassion toward other human beings in their transcendent dignity.

It is here that the example of Jesus Christ on the Cross comes fully into play. Even though Jesus’ act of complete self-sacrifice looks like a meaningless and ignominious death to people living on Levels 1 and 2, it manifests complete self-sacrificial love to those living on Level 3. For those living on Level 4, Jesus offers his life as an act of love for the *salvation* of the whole world. We can offer up our suffering to the Father in the same way with the same intention to help others in their salvation.

Agapē Is the Only Kind of Love That Can Initiate:

- Forgiveness
- Compassion for the marginalized
- Sympathy for the sick

NOTES

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

NOTES



Episode Timecode

9:30

III. Suffering and Purpose

Suffering and the Pursuit of Happiness

In fact, there are many ways suffering can contribute to our pursuit of happiness.

Overcoming Superficiality

Suffering can redirect our attention when we are living a superficial life, snapping us out of our distractions and complacency and forcing us to look—perhaps for the first time—at the deeper purpose of our lives.

Escaping Narcissism

We encountered narcissism in the Comparison Game. Looking down on other people, thinking we are the best, withdrawing into ourselves—suffering can shatter all these illusions by forcing us to accept, in our difficulties, that we need the support of others. This orientation toward others sets us on the path to a contributive life, moving us into the higher levels of happiness.

Defining Character

Suffering confronts us with challenges, and our responses to those challenges develop and define our character. Consider these examples:

- **Courage**

We can never know if we are courageous unless we experience fear, and fear presumes suffering.

- **Compassion**

If the world were perfect, no one would need us or our compassion—and we wouldn't need anybody or their compassion either. We would never know if we were capable of compassion or *agapē*.

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering

Improving the World

In fact, had God placed us in a perfect world, there would be nothing for us to do, no way of improving the world, no way of getting together with other human beings for a common cause.

“There Are Worse Things Than Suffering”

Father Spitzer recalls this expression of his father. It would be worse to live a life without courage, self-sacrifice for a noble cause, compassion, and self-definition.

A Life of Pleasure

He paints a picture of a life in which we are sheltered from all difficulties: just born into a pleasure bubble and drifting through life being coddled by God like little babies.

A Life of Growth

This thought reveals that growth in life requires suffering and leads us to our highest qualities and purpose: courage, nobility, making a difference in the world and joining with others to build the Kingdom of God.

Aids to Suffering

- Spontaneous prayers
- Looking for the good
- Following the Holy Spirit

NOTES

“There are worse things than suffering.”

NOTES

How to Suffer Well

If we know that suffering is part of our journey to happiness, we can move beyond just “trying to get through it”, to finding ways to suffer well and make our lives better in the process.

Spontaneous Prayer

Turning to God in the moment we experience suffering allows us to obtain God’s assistance, most importantly, but it also helps remind us to see the suffering from a higher perspective.

Looking for the Good

As we have seen, suffering can lead us to deeper insight and give us opportunities to improve ourselves through self-definition and self-sacrifice. Looking for these opportunities in the suffering we encounter gives us something positive to focus on and even appreciate.

Following the Holy Spirit

“When one door slams, the Spirit opens another”—we should remember, when we encounter difficulties, that setbacks sometimes allow the Spirit to force us off the path we were contentedly on, and to look around to discover the greater path God has in store for us.

“When one door slams,
the Spirit opens another.”

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering



Episode Timecode

18:45

Case Study: John Chavez

At age 24, this young lifeguard expected he had reached the point in his life where he would find the right woman and get married and start a family. Instead, he went into the hospital one day for a routine operation but, due to complications, found himself permanently blind.

At this catastrophic disruption of his life, John Chavez was faced with a choice: to go down the path of despair for the lifestyle he had lost, or to move forward down the path of faith to see what new life was now in store for him.

He was confronted with this choice as soon as he got out of the hospital. The head trauma rehab center rejected him—incredibly, on the grounds that he was blind. Their program didn't have accommodations for the blind and couldn't take him. John said he was coming anyway—he needed the program, and they'd just have to figure something out.

By the time he left, the center had four other blind students.

Where does the motivation come from to go down the path of faith and keep trying things in the face of setbacks? John says anyone can do it, but we often don't, because we look at what we can't do instead of what we can do. We put God in a box and say there's only one way, but John observes that God is infinite and has other ways for us.

When his own plans fell through, he kept his faith that God would take care of him in his own way and following his own timetable.

He has been led to new people, new challenges, new accomplishments, new relationships, and new memories on the path God led him down after he lost his sight. In fact, he's getting married to the love of his life, 30 years later than he had once expected to marry and under circumstances he never would have anticipated.

And he couldn't be happier.



NOTES

Lesson Seven—Happiness: Love and Suffering



Episode Timecode

36:29

IV. Conclusion

Through it all, we've seen how happiness, love, freedom, suffering, and faith are connected.

When they are all put together, they express our true dignity and destiny in the unconditionally loving God—the one who helps us through the struggles of superficiality, misuses of freedom, and imperfections in ourselves and others, and who guides us on our way to greater love through His Son, Jesus.

Saint Augustine said, “For you have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Happiness is a complex issue.

We've come through the **four levels of happiness**.

We've seen the **need to move** to Levels 3 and 4
and to look for the **good news** in others.

We've also seen how faith can lead to a much **broader and richer life**.

We looked at the evidence for **God**, our **soul**, and **life after death**.

We looked at the **unconditional love** of God,
the inevitability of **evil**, and
the mystery of **suffering**.

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So now we leave you with this final challenge:

- What are the steps you want to take to satisfy the restless heart?
- How will you move into the fullness of love, faith, freedom, happiness, and life?
- What will you do to bring yourself closer to the unconditionally loving God?

Thank you for joining us on this journey into the heights of happiness.

About the Author: Father Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.

Born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on May 16, 1952, Father Spitzer is a Catholic priest in the Jesuit order, and is currently the President of the Magis Center of Reason and Faith (www.magiscenter.com) and the Spitzer Center (www.spitzercenter.org). The Magis Center produces documentaries, books, high school curricula, college courses, adult-education curricula, and new-media materials to show the close connection between faith and reason in contemporary astrophysics, philosophy, and historical study of the New Testament. The Spitzer Center produces facilitated curricula to strengthen culture, faith, and spirit in Catholic organizations as well as nonprofit and for-profit organizations.

Father Spitzer was President of Gonzaga University from 1998 to 2009. He has made multiple media appearances including Larry King Live (debating Stephen Hawking, Deepak Chopra, and Leonard Mlodinow about creation and science), the Today Show, the History Channel in “God and the Universe”, and a multiple-part PBS series “Closer to the Truth”. He has also appeared on dozens of nationally syndicated radio programs. He has given hundreds of presentations to universities, learned societies, professional societies, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies both nationally and internationally (including members of Tony Blair’s Cabinet in London, officials of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia, both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland, government officials in El Salvador, as well as international universities, corporations, and Catholic organizations).



Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D.

Happiness! The Series addresses the most basic but often unexamined question of happiness—what it is, where it comes from, and how it defines the choices in our lives.

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Other Books by Father Spitzer

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New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy
(Winner of the Catholic Press Association Award for best book in faith and science)

Ten Universal Principles: A Brief Philosophy of the Life Issues

Healing the Culture: A Commonsense Philosophy of Happiness, Freedom, and the Life Issues

Spirit of Leadership: Optimizing Creativity and Change in Organizations

Five Pillars of the Spiritual Life: A Practical Guide to Prayer for Active People