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(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

Barnabas Piper is the author of several books, including the newly released *Hoping for Happiness*. As Russell Moore says, “In this book, Barnabas leads us to what it might mean to be a people surprised by joy and surprised to be happy at last.” Barnabas is on the church staff at Emmanuel Nashville. He’s also the father of two daughters and the co-host of The Happy Rant Podcast. He blogs at [BarnabasPiper.com](http://BarnabasPiper.com).

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Here’s hoping this conversation with Barnabas Piper brings you as much happiness as it brought me.

Barnabas Piper, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast today!

**BARNABAS PIPER:** Thanks so much for having me on. It’s been a long time coming!

**JR:** Yeah! I know. So this book, Hoping for Happiness — this podcast is gonna release a few days before your book, and we talked about doing this months ago at an in-person gathering, believe it or not.

**BP:** And if that makes people nervous, that was before we were told that that was not wise, before the pandemic ended all the fun.

**JR:** That’s right. But now we’re finally doing this. Thank you Zoom. Okay, *Hoping for Happiness*. You um… as I read through your manuscript, I — I know you’re talking about issues that are much larger than writing and creativity, but I kept… it is my tendency to apply whatever I’m reading to what this has to do with the creative process. And I see a lot of important things in there, and I’m sure you’ve written — this is your fourth book, right?

**BP:** That’s right.

**JR:** And so you’ve had plenty of occasion to think through the issues around happiness and writing. And as you mention in your introduction, of all the sort of weak hooks on which we hang our happiness, one of them is creative work. I mean, our work in general, but it seems that even more than say, an electrician, people… it seems like electricians have somewhat realistic expectations about how happy their work is gonna make them compared to what writers and songwriters and people who make a living in creative fields — or not even whether they make a living or not — we expect creative expression to somehow make us happy in ways that are sometimes unreasonable, it seems to me.

**BP:** Yeah, I think that’s absolutely true. Especially that distinction between creative work and other kinds of work. There’s a pretty clear… I don’t think most people go into most professional fields with the clear expectation that this is gonna be the most fulfilling thing in the world. This is a — this plays an important part in my life, it provides for my family, I have some skills at it, et cetera. Creative work, we’re putting ourselves into the world.

I think some of the reasons that we — people who write, people who create, whether it’s music or visual arts or whatever it is — have that sense because the work that we’re putting in comes from us. When your’e an electrician, you’re fixing other people’s stuff. You’re wiring something according to specs. You’re very valuable, and we wouldn’t be having this conversation if somebody hadn’t done a good job doing it. So… but, when you write a book, when you write a poem, when you paint a picture, that is from your mind, your heart, your emotions, your best effort at putting truth into the world, beauty into the world, whatever it is. So we hang a lot more of ourselves not hose works, in terms of fulfillment, only to find that it does not deliver in the way we anticipated.

I remember when I released my first book in 2014, I had this… I wouldn’t say it was explicit, but it was this sort of interior sense of how my life would improve upon the release of this book. I wouldn’t have said I wanted to get famous. I wouldn’t have said I wanted to get rich. I wouldn’t have said — which is good, because neither of those things happened. I wouldn’t have said — I couldn’t have tangibly said how my life would be better, but I expected on release day for the sun to come out from behind the clouds in the way that it never had before. And it didn’t happen. I woke up the next day and I was still me, and my life was still my life, and my job was still my job, and nothing had changed except this work was in the world. And that kicked off for me what is now a six or seven year process of figuring out what is reasonable to expect from creative work. What is it I should be hoping for, should be banking on, should be expecting, and what is it that’s not helpful? And again, trying to avoid pessimism or cynicism.

You don’t want to write something and be like, “Well, this sucks and nobody’s going to like it.” Otherwise, why are you doing it? Neither do you want to say, “This is going to change the world,” because now I think you’re just setting yourself up for disappointment.

**JR:** Yeah, because I think it’s your business to do the work. It’s God’s business what happens after that.

**BP:** Right.

**JR:** I think release day is the loneliest day in the world. Because you know, you’re the same, you’re as obscure — I mean, speaking for myself — I’m obscure all the time, but on release day you’re more aware of your obscurity.

**BP:** Yeah, you feel like you shouldn’t be, and you still are.

**JR:** (laughs) Right.

**BP:** I mean, think about it. You set up the perfect release for an album, for a book, and you get everybody you know who’s famous and less famous to tweet about it, Instagram post this thing, share with all their friends… it still doesn’t feel like enough. Because inevitably, two months later, somebody goes, “I didn’t know you wrote books!”

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah…

**BP:** I get that all — I mean, this is my fourth book, and people at my church don’t know that I’m an author. And I’ve come to almost appreciate that, because they are so innocently honest. They don’t realize there’s an element in saying that that’s very hurtful. They’re not trying to hurt me, they’re just… oh, I didn’t know. And it’s a really helpful metric to measure my stupid ego against, or my stupid expectations. Like, did I really expect this person who’s been at the church for six months and is trying to figure out how to become a member to know that I’ve written four— why? Why would I expect that? How important do I think I am? And what am I actually expecting of this work that I do?

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. And at least they’re not pretending to have read your work when that hadn’t.

**BP:** Yeah, I really like people who are like, “Oh no, I haven’t read that. I’ve never heard of it.” I mean, you wish they had, but it’s so much better than the faux anything.

**JR:** Yeah, right. Does the— so, you know, those issues beyond writing. Like, some of what we’ve been talking about is sort of publishing. The work itself… well, here’s a question. Do you write better when you’re happy? Are you more inclined to actually do the work when you’re happy?

**BP:** No. No, I’m not. Um, I… I’m inclined to have best intentions when I’m happy, but… I write… I think I write the best quality when I’m not happy, and I think I write with the most heart when I’m not happy. There’s a certain amount of… when you can see what your’e trying to achieve, but you’re not there? That sort of motivating factor.

So in a book about happiness, I did not write this from the perspective of somebody who is happier than everybody else in the world. I wrote this from the perspective of somebody who is on the exact same road of like see-sawing between I found a lot of pleasure in this, I was really disappointed by this, I found a lot of pleasure in this, I’m really disappointed by this — just like everybody else. So writing from a place of displeasure about happiness was more effective for me.

So the times in life where things are blissful, it’s really hard to create anything!

**JR:** Yeah! You just wanna go outside and lay in the grass.

**BP:** Yeah, I wanna enjoy all of the things that are blissful and not pause and do this work. Because creativity’s always work. Even when it’s going well, it’s work.

**JR:** Now, on the other hand, something that I appreciate that Andy Osenga says is it’s pretty important that you sit down at the same time of day, preferably not at night to write, because if you only write when you feel like writing, you’re gonna end up writing when you’re sad all the time. You’ll be sad, and your work will be sadder than you are.

**BP:** Yeah, it’ll just be a series of Jason Isbell songs.

**JR:** That’s right.

**BP:** Just a whole series of beautifully written sad songs.

**JR:** Yeah, right. I do love those sad songs though.

**BP:** Oh man, they’re so good.

**JR:** I mean, I hear Jason Isbell or George Jones and I wish I had more to be sad about, because that would really be a good… (laughs) This would really do me a lot of good. Okay, so this is a — the title of your book is *Hoping for Happiness*, not Hoping for Joy. Are you not familiar, Barnabas, with this idea that Christians are supposed to be joyful and not happy?

**BP:** Yeah, I’m quite familiar with it, and…

**JR:** (laughs)

**BP:** Thanks for putting that one out. That distinction is part of what made me unhappy enough to write this book. Let’s put it that way. Over time, I’d gotten really tired of the presentation of happiness as something that we were to be suspicious of at best. It’s trite, it’s temporal. Happiness is found in things that don’t last. I mean, I had someone tell me on Twitter recently that happiness refers to things that — it’s happenings, things that go away. And I’m just like, that’s just a cute rhyme. There’s no actual meaning there. And joy is this grounded, substantive thing that Christians are supposed to have at all times, in all circumstances. But that doesn’t mesh with either re— it doesn’t mesh with the Bible, it doesn’t mesh with reality. It’s a distinction that was probably helpful at some point. It’s become something that’s diminished people’s freedom to enjoy God’s world.

So, the question I pose in this book — and I think it’s something for everyone to consider — if someone’s devoted to joy, they speak about joy, they write about joy, joy is their passion in life, and they’re not happy? What is that? Who can take them seriously? What does that even mean? So joy without happiness is nonsense. It just doesn’t make any sense. There’s a version of happiness that is not joy in the Lord, for sure. Because the world over is full of people who are not finding their joy in Christ, but who find a lot of happiness moment by moment in friends, in drink, in cookouts, in sex, in whatever. That’s real. They feel really happy, then they don’t.

But to separate the two as they are fundamentally different is just really unhelpful for the Christian, because the Bible tells us to rejoice in all circumstances. Rejoicing is an expression of positive emotion. That’s praise in a sense. That’s tied to gladness. That’s tied to happiness. That’s not a dour (mumbles) I have joy in the Lord in this miserable— you don’t see that tone anywhere. Not mention that Scripture just sets up over and over again the things of earth has things we’re supposed to enjoy. Genesis 1, God created it and it was good. Okay, well the goodness didn’t go away in Genesis 3. It just got messed up. And so you know, the things God gave us — the friendships, the relationships, the food, the drink, the beauty of nature, the beauty of creativity and art — are all things we’re supposed to find pleasure in. And if you can say that’s joy and not happiness, you’re doing some linguistic gymnastics that I don’t understand. So I absolutely think that Christians are supposed to pursue happiness, in gratitude to God for things that we find happiness in.

**JR:** And you seem to be suggesting that joy equips us for happiness. Is that fair to say?

**BP:** Yeah, I think the happiness that a Christian is called to has to be woven together with this joy in the Lord in a way that they can’t be separated. A happy Christian is a joyful Christian. A joyful Christian is a happy Christian. And there’s no separating those two. You remove Christ from the equation and I don’t think there’s genuine joy, and I think the happiness that’s there is one we should have a level of suspicion toward. But if Christ is involved, and happiness and joy are so intertwined… you can’t unwind those things.

**JR:** So what is… how does happiness relate to, say, optimism?

**BP:** I think happiness and optimism — or hope and optimism — there needs to be a distinction there.

**JR:** Are you talking about hope and optimism? Happiness and optimism?

**BP:** I would say hope and happiness… they’re playing on the same team.

**JR:** Okay.

**BP:** There’s a correlation there. Let me give the distinction between hope and optimism, then we can connect that to happiness, if I can remember what I’m trying to get at. I think optimism is often positivity for the sake of positivity. It is the mentality that 2021 is going to be so much better than 2020. The calendar’s gonna roll over, there’s probably gonna be fireworks. We’re not gonna have parties because we won’t be allowed to, but somebody’s gonna shoot of fireworks in my neighborhood at midnight, and then things are gonna be better. Why? Because one minute passed. So optimism doesn’t ground itself in reality. It just looks ahead and goes, man, things are gonna get better. The world is just like the stock market. Things are gonna trend upward. And it’s just a recipe for disappointment, or a recipe for more disengagement from reality. You either have to kind of roll your optimism forward and never ground yourself, or at some point you crash and burn.

It think hopefulness is looking forward and going 2021 *could* be a lot better. There are reasons to believe it could improve. And you know, societally or politically or, you know, Jesus could come back. There are reasons to believe this could improve. I don’t know if that’s gonna happen, but I have enough reason to have hope that I will get out of bed tomorrow and I will go about the business that God has given me to do, and I will throw myself into it. I’m gonna write, I’m gonna work, I’m gonna be a husband and father. I’m gonna do these things because hope pulls me forward. That, I think, is connected to happiness, because if you have that hopefulness, that set of what I think are realistic expectations — it could be terrible, but also there’s reason for hope — you can find happiness in life. You can take joy and happiness — I think those words are almost interchangeable — in the circumstances God has given you.

So optimism can lead to a version of happiness, but it can lead to happiness that is gone in a moment. Your optimism crashes and burns and then your happiness does too. Hopefulness can pivot with reality. Optimism can’t. It has to ignore reality.

**JR:** Gotcha. To steer this back to the subject of writing and creativity… Flannery O’Connor said people without hope don’t write novels, and they also don’t read them. She was talking specifically about novels, but I think we can also say books or, let’s just say write stuff! Even writing an article or a blog post requires some sort of hope.

**BP:** Mmhm.

**JR:** If you’re in despair, why write even a blog post?

**BP:** Yeah. It’s amazing how you saw that play out during those first few months of… when we were all locked in our homes. We were quarantined. People had more time for the most part than they had previously. People had more time to do creative work. And without fail, I saw people who do creative work — musicians, authors, artists — talking about how hard it was to buckle down and do the work. And I felt it. I had some writing deadlines, and I was like… I can’t do this. I don’t know how to do this right now. And I hadn’t tied it to that, but I think it was because when you look and go tomorrow is gonna be exactly like today, and the day after that is gonna be exactly like today, and everything is just gray and flat, life and emotion-wise? You lose hopefulness. I didn’t have a reason in those days to think tomorrow is gonna be an improvement on today. Now, it wasn’t depression, but it was just sort of like a grayness. So that makes sense.

And the other thing that people were saying was oh man, I’m gonna so much time, I’m gonna catch up on my reading list. Nope, didn’t do that either. I think Flannery O’Connor was very much in touch with the human emotion and drive that ties us to a future thinking self. Because if you’re writing, you’re writing to makes one difference in the future — to change somebody’s mind, to give somebody something beautiful, to inform somebody of something so that their life is more full, whatever it is. And if you’re reading, you’re reading for the same purposes. If you’re reading a story, you’re wanting to draw on this presentation of a better reality, or a reality that could be, or something that sparks imagination. And none of that matters if tomorrow is flat and gray and exactly like today. So yeah, I think that sense of hopefulness in creative work or creative participation makes a lot of sense.

**JR:** Yeah. In an earlier conversation, you and I were talking about the idea — when I say earlier conversation, I mean when we were talking and I failed to press the record button — we were talking about the idea of, you know, the way that writers can sort of, in a more localized sense than — in a smaller sense than what your book is about, but this is podcast about writing so I’m gonna put it in those terms. We easily lose hope. A bad day of writing — which I’ve had so many bad days of writing! It feels like I’m never gonna write a good sentence again. For some reason it feels like we go straight to that kind of despair. I mean, it’s not literally despair, but just a tendency to… we get it in our head that because this is a bad day I’m never going to do anything interesting again.

And by the way, successfully writing a book is only a little bit of help, because you think that’s all I had to say and now I’m gonna never write anything again.

**BP:** Yeah. The well is dry.

**JR:** Right. Um… I’m sure you have dealt with this kind of thing before.

**BP:** Yeah, I would say especially early on. So when I started writing with consistency and realized this was something I wanted to invest myself in — I’ve never made a living as a writer, but I’ve written and put stuff into the world consistently for ten-ish years, give or take. I’d say those first couple to four years or so, I really struggled with that. Especially once I was given the opportunity to write on deadline. You know, you’ve gotta turn in a piece every Wednesday by 10 pm for a website. And there were a lot of Wednesdays at 7pm where I was like, I don’t have it. But by year six or seven, I was able to look back and go I have delivered every Wednesday. Some of those were absolute trash pieces… but they were on time.

**JR:** (laughs)

**BP:** I got em in! And yeah, you use the analogy of creativity’s not a well or a reservoir. Creativity is a stream or a river. And so it flows. You don’t just use it up and go well, I guess I”m done with that. So being able to look back and say the feeling that I have right now is the same feeling I had two weeks ago on Wednesday.

**JR:** Yeah.

**BP:** But I found it. I did the work. And it just… you can build on past experiences to work through that in terms of the reason for hope in your work, or the reason for pressing on the purpose of it. I’ve also found that there’s a richness in identifying with your work, because you write better when you’re writing deeply from yourself. But there’s also being able to balance that with taking a step back and going, “The work is not me.”

**JR:** Yeah… that’s so important.

**BP:** The work does not define me, nor does it — life, if somebody criticizes the work, I don’t lose value as a human, which is tough for creative people because you pour yourself into this stuff. And so being able to do that also allows for fending off despair. Cause when you’re struggling, you are not struggling as a human. Your worth as human is not diminished by the quality of your work. You’re just having a bad day at the office, so to speak. You know? Anybody who hikes or runs or whatever… some days you just feel like you’re dragging sandbags because it’s just that day. And creativity’s like that, but we just don’t think of it in those terms. We think I AM a sandbag.

**JR:** I think that is so important, and for some reason… yeah. As you said, you identified the reason. But I don’t know why we find it so hard to say a bad day writing is like a bad day running or a bad day… any other kind of bad day. And it may just be a matter of I’ve got a cold, or I didn’t sleep well last night. Now the jig is up!

**BP:** And people whose life circumstances change… so people who write, and then they have a child. An infant is the worst muse.

**JR:** (laughs)

**BP:** Because they just suck all your energy away. You just have to be able to differentiate between good writing from good parenting, creative work from this other really valuable, beautiful, wonderful, important thing that you do. If you can’t write well or at all for a while, nothing is diminished. You’re just hitting pause because something else demands it. But I think creative people identify so much with the work that anything that throws a monkey wrench into that system is… it feels like the end of themselves. It’s not just the end of, well, alright, I guess I’ll just go do something else. No, it’s I don’t know what I am anymore, I don’t know who I am, because I cannot write or create in this manner.

**JR:** Yeah. And I can’t imagine… you know, I’ve expected my happiness to come from being able to do this, and I can’t imagine being happy without it. Although I have to say, not writing is something I have a lot of experience with.

**BP:** (laughs)

**JR:** Not writing is kind of my hobby!

**BP:** Yeah, I mean most creative people spend more time not creating than creating, so learning to find happiness there is real valuable too.

**JR:** Yeah. Right. You describe yourself as a “recovering cynic.” What do you mean by that?

**BP:** Um… my default for most of my life that — well, the part of my life that I’d call the mature years, post college — has been to respond to things in a… to look for the negative? Not in a pessimistic, “this is gonna be as bad as possible,” but just kind of always on the hunt for “yeah, but… what about…?” And an element of that is also holding back, you know? If you give 90% and things don’t go well, you can always blame the 10% you didn’t give? If you give 100% to something and it doesn’t go well, then it’s on you. Thats what it feels like. But that is a cynical view of life, because it is essentially hedging bets to protect against what doesn’t feel good instead of living fully with expectations of, man, this could go really well.

So, that kind of cynicism puts a ceiling on how much enjoyment you can have. Because if you only give 90%, you can’t give 100% satisfaction either. That’s true in a relationship, that’s true in creative work. I’ve written pieces that I wish I had written differently. I wish I had been more forthcoming, more honest. Like, I wrote them truthfully, but just… opaquely. Transparency would have given more satisfaction in how that landed, for example. So that’s what I mean by a recovering cynic. Moving to the place or realistically looking at this and going this could go really badly, but it’s worth it to throw myself into this. This relationship, this book, this article, this work, whatever it is, parenting — and not sort of cynically say I’m gonna hedge against what could possibly go wrong and sort of yeah, it’s more likely to not go well.

**JR:** You’re from Minnesota, right?

**BP:** I am.

**JR:** Isn’t that sort of the land of kind of lowering your expectations? At least, from Prairie Home Companion that’s the impression I get.

**BP:** Yeah, high praise in Minnesota is, “Could be worse.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**BP:** And all of our sports teams have trained us to have low expectations. When you have high expectations, you get disappointed. The Minnesota Vikings have taught me that every year of my life.

**JR:** Yeah, I went to Vanderbilt, so…

**BP:** You didn’t have any expectations?

**JR:** That’s true. Yeah. No, you talk about in your book the idea of ping ponging between expecting too much and expecting too little and trying to find a middle. We expect too much, which is a recipe for disappointment, then we expect way too little, which is a recipe for cynicism or… it’s not a recipe for happiness.

**BP:** No, definitely not.

**JR:** It’s a recipe for less disappointment, perhaps.

**BP:** Yeah.

**JR:** Again, as you were saying about optimism, you’re happy until you’re not. And it seems to me that with low expectations it’s the same way. You’re not disappointed until you suddenly are very disappointed.

**BP:** Yeah, I think cynicism is reining in expectations for the sake of avoiding pain, for the sake of avoiding disappointment. The further you rein those in, the further you rein in your opportunity for enjoyment. So… I just got married a month ago at this point. If I walked into this marriage with the exception of it’s probably gonna be difficult, the hard days are coming, so I should probably just sort of bear down, be patient, wait it out, I will not be disappointed when those days come. I knew they were coming, I expected them. But also, I have reined in the opportunity for all of the enjoyment of a person who I’d just said I want to spend the rest of my life with them. All of the pleasures of marriage, a deepening relationship of all of these things.

So that’s where there’s a… optimism would be foolish, to say it’s gonna be blissful for the rest of our lives. Nonsense. That’s just not the case. But cynicism takes away my opportunity for reveling in the things that are worth reveling in. So there has to be the whole premise of the book is to expect the right things from the right things. So from marriage, there should be the expectation of tremendous joy, and there should be the expectation of we’re gonna hurt each other in some way. We’re gonna disappoint one another. And I say one another because that’s absolutely a two way street. I will be very disappointed. And so if you can hold those in tension, you can find genuine happiness and not be completely broadsided when things are not as good as they could be.

**JR:** Yeah. So what are the right things to expect from writing and creative work?

**BP:** Oh man, that’s a big question. I think… I think that has to be measured by the purpose of the work. So, I write nonfiction books from the Christian perspective. If you’re a novelist, your aim might be different from what mine is, because I’m gonna affect people’s perspective on something. So that’s my purpose. Now, if my expectation is that releasing this book is going to change my life monetarily or change my reputation amongst literary critics or raise my profile as a nationally recognized speaker or whatever… those are probably bogus expectations. If my expectation is when this book gets in the hands of an unhappy person it’s going to bring some level of light to their life? I think I’ve landed at the right spot.

So that’s the purpose of my work. My work is not done… I can’t have the purpose of personal gain. That’s a side effect, maybe. But if the purpose is being of benefit to those with a specific need, when I hear from those people that say, “Your book was really encouraging. It helped me level my expectations, find groundedness, whatever. And that’s… for me, that is… that’s the most important part of expectation in creative work. Why am I writing this, and am I measuring myself by that purpose as opposed to anything else?

**JR:** Yeah. What about somebody who doesn’t have a book deal, and maybe has a blog but doesn’t have that many people reading it?

**BP:** Yeah, I think… well, that’s most writers total, and it’s also most writers at the beginning. And it’s a great place to start, and for some people that is where they are. So again, I think if you’re gonna do anything creatively and continue with it, you need to know why. Like, when you sit down to write a blog post for your 112 readers… why? Why are you doing it? There are a lot of good reasons to do it. That’s not a cynical question to say, “Why are you even doing this?” as much as what is it that drives you to put the kids to bed, get that 17th cup of coffee of the day, and get to work. And are you fulfilling that purpose?

So is it encouragement? Is it storytelling? Is it community building? Creative work is a great way to draw people together, you know. If you have 112 consistent readers who enjoy discussion around your work, you’ve created something of great value. Your work has a purpose of value. If you’re saying something true with beauty, that’s a hard thing to do. It’s not that hard to say true things. It’s hard to say true things beautifully. If you’re striving for that, you have a purpose that’s worth pursuing in just continuing to plug away at this thing.

**JR:** Yeah, I think it’s so important that we uncouple our expectations from those things that we have no control of.

**BP:** Yeah.

**JR:** You talk about those Wednesday night deadlines… mine is Monday night because I put out a letter on Tuesday, and I’ve just loved having that small thing that I am accountable for and it is under my control whether I get that out every Tuesday morning, and what happens then is not in my control. And if I have any expectations beyond those things, I’m just asking for trouble.

**BP:** Yeah, and I think there is… if you have no expectations outside of that, you can still take great joy in those things. But they’re like wonderful surprises, you know? If your goal is to do the pieces that are in your control — I want to put out the best piece of truthful writing, as beautifully as I can, full stop. Then you find out that somebody shared it and somebody else shared it and somebody else shared it, and it went sort of pseudo-viral… that’s a wonderful surprise! But it shouldn’t alter your expectations for the next thing you write. The next thing you write should be I wanna put out the most truthful thing I can, the most beautifully written thing I can, full stop. Because most of them don’t go viral, and we don’t need to be skewed by that.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, no the… it’s… we talk about setting expectations, and we think of setting expectations in terms of high, low, medium. And I think it really has much more to do with just… not high, not low, not medium, but just the right expectations that align with what you’re actually doing. So not hey, lower your expectations of how many people are going to read your blog post. Your expectations, the ones that are gonna make you happy or not happy, need to be detached from your number of readers.

**BP:** Yeah, I used the phrase earlier expecting the right things of the right things, and that’s because I don’t like — exactly what you just said — I don’t like the phrasing of “expecting too much.” It’s what are you expecting them from? What are you aiming your expectations at? Cause if you’re hoping to get happiness from numbers… you can expect more, you can expect less, whatever. It’s gonna disappoint you.

**JR:** The problem with numbers is that they’re infinite! There’s always something higher.

**BP:** Yes. Until every person in the population reads your stuff and loves it, you will be disappointed, and then you’re gonna have to do it the next day.

**JR:** And by the way, in the event that everybody read it and loved it, then you’ve got the option of saying, “They must not really know me, or they wouldn’t love it.” So if you do succeed — I mean, if you succeed numerically and you’re J.K. Rowling — then you’ve got imposter syndrome waiting around the corner for you.

**BP:** Yes. Oh yeah, that’s a devious son of a gun, that one is. But I think we can — so taking this out of the creative realm for just a moment, I think we can… for example, we talk about having expectations for God? You can expect… it’s almost impossible to expect too much of God or too little of God. We’re always expecting the right things or the wrong things of God, so it’s an alignment of what he has said he will or won’t do. Cause God is infinite! And so there’s no way to expect too much of God, but you can expect God to do things that he didn’t say he was gonna do. That’s a wrong expectation. That’s not dissimilar from expecting the wrong thing of my creative work.

**JR:** Yes.

**BP:** So it’s, am I expecting it to accomplish something that it’s not for, or that it shouldn’t be the purpose? There’s an alignment of what should and should not be, which is where expectations need to be measured, rather than quantitatively.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. Something you said just gave me a moment of insight that I… that I… (sigh) Oh well. I guess it’s gone forever. It would’ve, uh, it would’ve solved everything. Our happiness problem would’ve been cured permanently.

**BP:** Yeah, the podcast would’ve moved right to the top of the rankings with that thought. I guess we’ll never know.

**JR:** (laughs) I guess we’ll never know. Alright, I gotta wrap up. We gotta bring this thing in for a landing. So tell me, who are the writers who make you want to write, Barnabas?

**BP:** So I write mostly nonfiction, but most of the writers who make me want to write are fiction writers… or were when they were alive. Um, John Steinbeck is one of my all time favorites. Um, Pat Conroy.

**JR:** When you read John Steinbeck, what about that work makes you want to go sit down and write something?

**BP:** Steinbeck had the ability to write the stuff of real life with more clarity than just about anybody I’ve read, and did it with a… kind of with an economy of prose? His descriptions were not long and flowery. They were substantial, but he didn’t drag on and on and on. And he seemed to get kind of the full scope of what is beautiful and what is dark. He didn’t sort of wallow in the darkness. Like I think about how in *Travels with Charlie*, he’s got a chapter in there about spending Thanksgiving in Texas, and it’s one of the funniest things I’ve ever read. Texans will read it and think it’s a compliment. Everybody else will read it and think it’s an insult.

**JR:** (laughs)

**BP:** And that’s kind of the genius of Steinbeck. So yeah, being able to touch on the undercurrent of reality with that much clarity. Conroy, um, writes pain better than anybody.

**JR:** Yeah, he really does.

**BP:** And he does wallow in the darkness. He finds sort of a dark Irish-Catholic sort of hope in it. There’s sort of a cynical sense of humor there. But he’s just… yeah. You can tell that he has read every great author who’s ever lived or something close to it, because he just draws on the styles and the vocabulary and the plot devices and everything.

On the nonfiction side, I would say Lewis and Chesterton, because they’re the two most persuasive writers in a nontraditional fashion. You know, in terms of Chesterton’s a little bit more in your face — you’re a fool, let me tell you why, and now you’re persuaded kind of thing, which I find great pleasure in. And he’s also funny. I really like the humor. Lewis had a way of walking people through a series of thoughts that you didn’t know quite where it was going, and then you arrive at a conclusion and it’s sort of like walking out of the woods and going whoooaaa look at this. So the way they pieced together thought to bring people to a conclusion. And never in a devious way, but just in a… a roundabout way, it seemed, until you go oh, that all makes sense in retrospect.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Yeah. Great. Alright man. Hey, Barnabas Piper, thanks for being here. This made me happy.

**BP:** Me too.

**JR:** (laughs) We’ll talk again soon.

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit [jessraymusic.com](http://jessraymusic.com) to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at [TheHabit.co](http://TheHabit.co).

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)

**DM:** This episode is brought to you by the Christian Standard Bible. Here’s Russ Ramsey on what draws him to the CSB as a pastor and a writer.

**RUSS RAMSEY:** So, here’s a couple of verses from Psalm 16: “Lord, you are my portion and my cup of blessing. You hold my future. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” I love the rhythm and the cadence of, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” There’s something just lovely about the structure of that sentence that conveys not only the content of what’s being said, but the poetry of it, you know. So there’s a very faithful diligence to conveying the poetry of the poetry books, while also conveying the specific content of them as well.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

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