

Even the Aardvarks

Finding Joy in the Small Things

BY NINA CESENA

There are books we read and enjoy, books that change the way we think, and books that somehow find a permanent home on our bookshelves. They stay with us through different seasons of life, quietly reminding us of who we were when we first opened them and how much we've grown since then.

For me, one of those books is *14,000 Things to Be Happy About* by Barbara Ann Kipfer.

I discovered it in college, and I've held on to it ever since. It isn't a Christian book. It doesn't contain Scripture or offer spiritual advice. Instead, it is a collection of ordinary, sometimes unexpected things that bring a little happiness to everyday life. And I loved it so much that I spent time highlighting many of my favorites.

One of those favorites? Aardvarks.

Yes, aardvarks.

I know. It seems like a rather random thing to highlight in a book about happiness. But they look funny, they're kind of cute, and something about them makes me smile. I couldn't tell you exactly why I chose to mark that particular word all those years ago. I just know it made me happy.

And perhaps that is part of what made the book so special to me. It gave me permission to notice the little things.

A Little Book, a Season of Life

When I think back to the season of life in which I discovered this book, I realize something important: my faith was not what it would eventually become.

I considered myself a believer, but I wasn't really walking closely with Christ. My faith had taken a back seat to other things, and I wasn't particularly grounded in Scripture or intentional about my relationship with God.

Looking back, I can see that this book became a simple way for me to practice gratitude, even if I wouldn't have described it that way at the time.

Life isn't always easy. Sometimes circumstances are genuinely hard, disappointing, or painful. And sometimes, even when life looks fine from the outside, we carry things on the inside that other people cannot see.

It is easy to let our attention settle on what is wrong. We replay the disappointment, rehearse the frustration, and wonder why things couldn't have turned out differently. Before long, the difficult thing becomes the *only* thing we can see.

But what if we made room for something else?

What if, in the middle of a difficult day, we noticed the first sip of a really good cup of coffee? What if we paused to appreciate the smell of a campfire, the warmth of the sunshine on our face, or the gooey center of a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie?

These things don't erase our problems. A good cup of coffee doesn't resolve a difficult relationship, and a chocolate chip cookie isn't going to change a disappointing diagnosis. (Although I will admit that a really good cookie can improve a moment!)

But those small pleasures can remind us that even on a hard day, not everything is hard. Beauty still exists. There are still things to appreciate. There are still moments worth noticing.

That little book helped me learn to look for them.

What If the Small Things Are More Than Small?

Years later, my understanding of faith has deepened, and I see something in those highlighted words that I didn't necessarily recognize at the time.

God is the Creator of the universe. He created the vastness of the heavens, the complexity of the human body, the beauty of the natural world, and every living creature under heaven.

Even aardvarks.

Have you ever stopped to consider how wonderfully unnecessary an aardvark might seem if you were simply designing a world to meet human needs? And yet, there they are, with their long snouts and peculiar appearance, going about their aardvark business.

I find that delightful.

Of course, I can't claim to know everything God had in mind when He created an aardvark. But I can appreciate the wonder of a Creator whose world is so much bigger, stranger, and more beautiful than my limited perspective can comprehend.

And that thought leads me somewhere personal.

If God has created a world filled with so much variety, beauty, and purpose, perhaps I don't need to understand everything about my own life to trust that I have a place in His story.

Perhaps I can stop measuring my worth by how well my life is going, how neatly things are falling into place, or how closely my circumstances match what I hoped they would be.

Perhaps I can simply begin by paying attention.

I wish I could say that I learned all of this in college, but I didn't. My faith journey has had its own seasons of wandering, learning, suffering, and growing. I've walked through circumstances that tested what I believed and forced me to look more closely at where I had placed my hope.

Over time, I came to understand that gratitude isn't about pretending everything is wonderful. It isn't about putting a cheerful spin on pain or convincing ourselves that we shouldn't feel disappointed, afraid, or sad.

It's about learning to recognize goodness even when life is not good in every respect.

And for me, that goodness ultimately points back to God.

We Pray for Peace. What If We're Missing Some of the Ways It Comes?

I think about how often we pray for peace. We ask God for comfort when we're hurting, for strength when we're weary, and for our circumstances to change when we don't know how much longer we can bear them.

Those are honest prayers. I've prayed them myself, and I believe God welcomes us when we bring Him our pain and our longing for things to be different.

But I've also begun to wonder how often we overlook the small ways He may already be meeting us in the middle of it all.

What if the peace we are praying for sometimes begins with a quiet moment in the morning before the demands of the day begin?

What if comfort arrives through the familiar scent of pine trees, a conversation with a friend, or the warmth of a meal shared around the table?

What if, in the middle of an overwhelming season, we find ourselves laughing at something completely ridiculous—and for a moment, the weight lifts?

These moments may not change our circumstances, but they can change the way we experience them.

Scripture reminds us in James 1:17 that every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father. I think that truth invites us to pay attention to the goodness around us rather than rushing past it in search of something bigger or more dramatic.

God is not limited to working through extraordinary moments. We can encounter reminders of His goodness in the ordinary rhythms of our days, too.

Sometimes we may be so focused on asking Him to change our circumstances that we miss the small gifts He has placed right in front of us.

A beautiful sunrise. A child's laughter. The smell of bread baking. A moment of unexpected kindness.

Even an aardvark.

I don't mean that noticing these things is a substitute for prayer, Scripture, or a growing relationship with Christ. In fact, the older I get and the deeper my faith becomes, the more I recognize how much I need all of those things.

But I do believe that learning to notice God's goodness in the everyday can help turn our hearts toward Him. Gratitude can become a way of paying attention—not because every circumstance is good, but because God's goodness is not confined to the circumstances we wish we could change.

Choosing Where I Place My Attention

One of the things I have learned over the years is that I cannot always choose what happens to me, but I can become more intentional about where I place my attention.

That doesn't mean I can simply decide not to be sad, stressed, or discouraged. It doesn't mean that difficult emotions disappear because I make a gratitude list. And it certainly doesn't mean that people walking through suffering need to try harder to be happy.

It means I can acknowledge what is hard without allowing it to occupy every corner of my perspective.

I can be disappointed about one part of my day and still appreciate another. I can pray for a breakthrough while being grateful for the strength to get through today. I can wish for things to be different and still recognize that there is goodness to be found right where I am.

For me, this has become less about forcing myself to feel grateful and more about cultivating the habit of noticing.

Sometimes that means taking a few extra seconds to enjoy my morning coffee instead of gulping it down while thinking about everything I need to accomplish. Sometimes it means appreciating the smell of a campfire, getting outside and noticing the beauty of the natural world, or baking something delicious simply because I enjoy it.

And sometimes it means opening an old book, turning to a page marked years ago, and smiling at the word *aardvarks*.

My faith has grown considerably since those college days. Today, I have a deeper understanding of who God is and what it means to trust Him, even when I don't understand what He is doing. I don't always get my perspective right, and I still have days when the difficult things demand more of my attention than I'd like.

But I keep learning.

I keep returning to the truth that my circumstances do not tell the whole story. My struggles are real, but so is God's goodness. My unanswered questions matter, but they don't have to be the only things I carry.

And I don't have to wait until everything is resolved to begin noticing the gifts that are already here.

A Little More Room for Joy

I still have that book. It has traveled with me through the years, and those highlighted words remain a reminder of a younger version of myself who was learning, perhaps without realizing it, how to look for joy.

I didn't have all the words for it then. I wasn't as grounded in my faith as I am today. But I was learning to pay attention to the little things that made life feel a little lighter.

Now, I see those small pleasures through a different lens. I see them as invitations to slow down, to appreciate the world God made, and to remember that even when life is difficult, there is still beauty to be found.

Maybe you are walking through a season when the big things feel especially heavy. Maybe you are waiting for an answer to prayer, longing for a change in circumstances, or simply trying to get through a day that has asked more of you than you feel able to give.

I won't tell you to look on the bright side or pretend that everything is okay. Some seasons really are hard, and you deserve room to acknowledge that.

But I might gently encourage you to look for one small thing today.

After all these years, I still believe there is something worth learning from a little book filled with 14,000 things to be happy about. Not that happiness is always a choice, or that gratitude makes suffering disappear, but that there is often more goodness in our lives than our struggles allow us to see.

And sometimes, the smallest things help us remember the biggest truths.

We are seen. We are loved. We are not alone.

And even in the middle of an unfinished story, there is still room for joy.

Now I'm curious: What's one small, perhaps unexpected thing that never fails to make you smile? I'd love to hear what it is. And if it's an aardvark, well, you'll have to tell me why!