

JOE RIGNEY

# STRANGELY

CAN YOU LOVE GOD AND ENJOY THIS WORLD?

# BRIGHT



“Many of us are illiterate when it comes to reading anything other than a book. Joe follows Scripture’s example by teaching us how to read the world, the creation, and the gifts of God under the authority of the word of God. This is an important book, and I hope you’ll read it.”

**Abigail Dodds**, author, *(A) Typical Woman: Free, Whole, and Called in Christ*

“God’s passion for his glory and our ache to be truly happy are not at odds but rather one life-changing pursuit. And so too with God himself and the world he made—not at odds but rather God means for us to enjoy him in everything, and everything in him. It sounds so simple, but in our finitude and fallenness, we are so prone to get tripped up over this. For years, Joe Rigney has handled this dilemma as well as anyone I’m aware of, and now he does it with even more focus and accessibility. I’ve eagerly awaited this short book with its life-changing vision, and I could hardly be more excited that it’s finally here.”

**David Mathis**, Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); Pastor, Cities Church, St. Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines*

“Since Constantine entered Rome in October of AD 312 and ended Christian persecution, the faithful have struggled with their embrace of God and their love for the world. Instead of gladiator games, it’s UFC. Instead of pagan celebrations, it’s Netflix binging and secularized holidays. How can Christians in the twenty-first century enjoy the world without sacrificing their primary obligation to love the Lord? Joe Rigney provides remarkably timely advice on enjoying God’s creation while still putting God above his creation.”

**Erick-Woods Erickson**, Editor, *The Resurgent*



*Strangely Bright*



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*Can You Love God and Enjoy This World?*

JOE RIGNEY

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To Jack Joseph Rigney  
A very good and perfect gift





# Contents

Introduction .....	11
1 What the Heavens Declare .....	19
2 Pleasures in the Garden .....	35
3 Enjoying the Gifts When Jesus Is Better .....	47
4 Anchor Points .....	57
5 Denying Ourselves and Sharing Our Riches .....	73
6 When the Things of Earth Are Lost .....	87
7 Treasure in the Field .....	101
Epilogue .....	109
Appendix .....	111
Notes .....	113
General Index .....	115
Scripture Index .....	119



# Introduction

This little book has a simple purpose. I want to address a problem that I suspect many readers have felt, even if you've never named it. If you're a faithful Christian, this problem or tension has probably haunted you, playing at the back of your mind and affecting you in subtle ways.

Let me introduce the problem by telling you a little of my story. When I was in ninth grade my family joined a church plant in our mid-sized West Texas town. My formative high school years were spent in that church. One of the things I remember our pastor saying over and over again is that life is not about me. It's about God. It's about Jesus. I remember him telling us that in the book of Ezekiel, God repeatedly says that he does all the things he does—creating the world, saving his people, punishing sin, judging his enemies—for one main reason: so that people will know that God is the Lord. God, it seems, is radically God-centered. He does everything that he does for the sake of his name, for his glory. This biblical truth made an impact on me, not only because of what was said, but because of *how* it was said. From my pastor to the youth leaders to the youth-camp speakers that were frequently brought in, there was an intensity, a zeal, a fire in the eyes that communicated to my high-school self that the things that we were talking about were

## *Introduction*

the most important things in life. Jesus is real. Jesus saves. Jesus restores. Jesus gives us significance. And he does all of it for the sake of his name.

When I went off to college, the biblical truth that everything is about God was filled up and filled out. I was already primed for it. I became familiar with the ministry of John Piper, a pastor in Minneapolis. Piper put his finger on a tension that I'd felt in my own life, a tension between the biblical truth that everything is about God and the experiential truth that I wanted to be happy. I knew that I wanted to be happy and that I wanted my life to matter, to count for something. The desire for happiness and significance was like breathing. And Piper showed me, as he's shown thousands of others through his preaching and writing, that in the end, there is no tension between God's passion for his glory and my passion for my happiness. This is because God made me so that I would find my deepest happiness in him. In fact, Piper summarized his biblical conclusions in a simple yet life-changing statement: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. That truth went off like an explosion in my soul. All my passion for meaning, significance, happiness, and joy was channeled into a passion to glorify God by enjoying him above all earthly things.

After college, I made my way north to Minneapolis to be trained and equipped as a pastor at The Bethlehem Institute (now Bethlehem College & Seminary), an apprenticeship program at Piper's church. I came to saturate myself in Christian Hedonism, the provocative term that Piper used to describe the biblical truth that we glorify God by seeking our highest pleasure in him. I wanted to see what this approach to life and ministry looked like on the ground. I loved the mission statement of the church and the school: "We exist to spread a passion for

the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.” And in God’s providence, not only did I attend seminary at Bethlehem, but I now teach at Bethlehem College & Seminary and pastor a church in the Twin Cities. And I’m still a Christian Hedonist, and I still love that mission. And though you may not use the same words, I assume that if you’re a Christian, you resonate at some level with those truths. The supremacy of God in all things. For the joy of all peoples. Jesus Christ at the center.

### **The Experiential Tension**

This brings me back to this book. As I said, Christian Hedonism resolved one tension, the tension between God’s passion for his glory and my passion for happiness. But it also created another tension. Maybe you’ll hear it in a passage like Psalm 73:25–26:

Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion  
forever.

You can hear the Christian Hedonism in the passage. God is the strength of my heart. I desire nothing besides him. He’s my all and my everything. He’s my portion forever. Christians love to sing songs like that. And yet if we stop and think about it, do we really mean it? “On earth there is nothing I desire besides you.” Really? Not your family? Not your friends? Not your hobbies? Not your favorite food? If we’re honest, don’t we speak out of both sides of our mouth? On the one hand, we say, “I desire nothing but you, God,” and on the other hand, we say, “Except for all the other things I desire.” And there’s the tension

that produced this book: how does a single-minded pursuit of the glory of God fit with a real and deep enjoyment of created things? Let me get more concrete: how does the rock-bottom biblical truth that you are called to glorify God by delighting in him above everything else relate to your enjoyment of good friends, pork tamales, the laughter of children, West Texas sunsets, marital love, and college football?

My guess is that many of you have asked that question and felt this tension too. You're torn by your desire to love and honor God above all things and your unavoidable and inescapable delight in earthly things. You've felt a kind of low-grade guilt whenever you *really* enjoy an earthly pleasure. Maybe you live with a perpetual sense that you're not enjoying God "enough" (whatever that means) or that you're enjoying his gifts "too much" (whatever that means). Maybe you've begun to treat created things like hot potatoes, looking at your delight in physical affection and chocolate ice cream and a walk around the lake in early fall with a wary and skeptical eye, because you wonder whether it's too precious to you. Maybe you have a sense that as you grow in holiness, as you become more like Jesus, that your enjoyment of fresh raspberries and lively conversation with friends and gardening in the springtime ought to diminish, ought to grow dim, because you're increasingly satisfied with God *alone*.

Often these vague feelings are rooted in our beliefs and convictions. We know that God is infinitely valuable, and that our family and friends and food are not, and therefore, we feel that there ought to be a larger gap between our love for *them* and our love for *him*. Knowing this, we sometimes try to suppress our joy in the things of earth so that they don't compete and get in the way of our love for Christ. Or, on the other side of things, we try to suppress our *grief* whenever we lose gifts that are very

dear to us—like a spouse, or a parent, or child—because we don't want to dishonor God by treating them as idols. We fear that our sadness and pain reveal that these earthly gifts are too precious to us. This is the experiential tension, and if you've felt it, this book is for you.

### The Biblical Tension

It's important to note that this isn't just a tension in our experience. It's a tension in the Bible. In fact, for most of us, we feel the experiential tension precisely because we want to believe and obey God's word. So think with me about the following passages of Scripture.

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and *count them as rubbish*, in order that I may gain Christ. (Phil. 3:7–8)

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*. (Col. 3:1–2)

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion  
forever. (Ps. 73:25–26)

Let's call these the *Totalizing* passages, since they express a total and complete devotion to God in Christ. Everything is rubbish compared to Christ. Don't set your mind on things below. Desire



## Introduction

nothing besides God. That's one message in the Bible. Now consider passages like this:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, *who richly provides us with everything to enjoy*. (1 Tim. 6:17)

*For everything created by God is good*, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. (1 Tim. 4:4)

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above*, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)

Let's call these the *Things of Earth* passages, since they express the goodness of enjoying created things. And when we place these passages side by side, we're faced with a conundrum—which is it: *Only* desire God? Or enjoy *everything* God richly provides? Count everything as rubbish? Or receive everything with thanksgiving? Set your mind on things above? Or enjoy the good and perfect gifts that have come down from above? This is not just a tension in your life; it's a tension in the Bible.

## Overview

The seven chapters in this book seek to resolve both the biblical and the experiential tension. Each chapter is anchored in a passage of Scripture. We begin with Psalm 19 and explore the ways that God's word and God's world work together in order to show us what he's like and teach us how to relate to him.

In chapter 2 we walk through the early chapters of Genesis and reflect on God's original design and purpose for the world. There we see that God is truly a hedonist at heart, scattering

pleasures of every kind throughout his creation both for our enjoyment and for the fulfillment of his mission.

In the third chapter we consider two complementary approaches to God and his gifts: an integrated approach based in Proverbs 24:13–14 and a comparative approach based in Romans 1 and Psalm 73:25–26. Our calling is to enjoy God in everything and everything in God, while knowing deep in our bones that Jesus is better than every earthly good.

In chapter 4 we unpack the importance of setting our minds on things above, from Colossians 3:1–4. This heavenly mindset is both oriented by Christ and profoundly earthy, and works itself out in rhythms of direct and indirect godwardness.

In chapter 5 we consider two crucial tests of our enjoyment of the things of earth. Both self-denial (Luke 9:23–25) and generosity (1 Tim. 6:17–19) serve our joy in God and his gifts by guarding us against the dangers of ingratitude, idolatry, and sinful indulgence.

In chapter 6 we take a long, hard look at suffering, death, and the loss of good gifts. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3–11 expose some of the challenges of suffering and loss as well as the only source of true and lasting comfort.

Finally, in chapter 7, we get concrete and particular as we explore one of my favorite things of earth—the game of baseball. For me, baseball is a thick and layered joy, a complex pleasure that illustrates many of the truths in this book. My hope is that this final chapter provides a helpful model as you seek to enjoy your own things of earth for the glory of God.

In all of this, my desire is simple. I want to work with you for your joy. Your joy in your family. Your joy in your friends. Your joy in your pancakes and eggs, your steak and potatoes, your chips and your salsa. Your joy in your camping trips, workouts,

## *Introduction*

and Spotify playlist. Your joy in the Bible, in worship services, and in the quiet moments before you fall asleep. Your joy in your job, your hobbies, and your daily routine.

And in and through all these things, I want to work with you for your joy in the living and personal God who delivered you from sin and death through the work of his Son and Holy Spirit and gives you all these things that you might enjoy him *and* them and him *in* them forever.

## What the Heavens Declare

Psalm 19 begins with one of the most famous verses in the Bible: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” The first half of the psalm celebrates God’s glory in nature—in the heavens (v. 1), in the sun’s course across the sky (vv. 4, 6), in the similarities between the sun and a warrior and a bridegroom (v. 5). This revelation has gone out to the entire world so that there is no place where God’s revelation is not heard (vv. 2–4). In other words, the psalm begins with a celebration of what theologians call “general revelation.” General revelation includes all the ways that God reveals himself in creation—in the ordinary course of nature and the general course of history. In other words, it’s not just the heavens that declare the glory of God. *Everything* that God has made declares the glory of God. The apostle Paul tells us that God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made*” (Rom. 1:20). In other words, made things make invisible attributes visible. Created things make eternal things perceivable. God’s own

power and righteousness and beauty and wisdom and mercy are invisible attributes. We can't see them directly. But when we see a tornado tear across the plains, we see his power. When we stand on a giant mountain, we feel the firmness and stability of his righteousness. When we watch the sun set over the Pacific Ocean, we see his beauty. When we witness the magnificent intricacy of the food chain—deer eating grass and then being eaten by lions—we see his inscrutable wisdom and mercy over all that he has made. Made things make invisible attributes visible.

That's what we mean by general revelation, and by its nature, it is pervasive and constant. It's accessible to all men everywhere. "There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard" (Ps. 19:3). As C. S. Lewis said, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito."<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century American pastor and theologian, testified that he believed that the whole universe, heaven and earth, from top to bottom and front to back is filled with "images of divine things, as full as a language is of words."<sup>2</sup> By this, he meant that everything in creation is communication from God about God. God speaks to us everywhere and in everything.

### **Earthly Categories for Spiritual Things**

General revelation works both directly and indirectly. It works directly by creating categories in our minds and hearts for knowing God. This is direct because we move straight from the made thing to God himself. How do the heavens declare the glory of God? Through their size and majesty. The vastness of the heavens points to the greatness of God. Or the beauty of a sunset gives us a visual picture of the beauty and holiness of God. Or the sun's perpetual and constant shining images God's constant

and everlasting goodness. In each case, we move straight from the made thing to God himself. Our experience of the world gives us categories for knowing God and his word.

And not just God himself. General revelation gives us categories for knowing many aspects of the spiritual life. Consider Psalm 1.

Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree  
    planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
    and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.  
The wicked are not so,  
    but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps. 1:1–4)

In this psalm, fruitful trees are audiovisual aids to help us understand the blessed and righteous man, just as tumbleweeds are audiovisual aids to help us understand the wicked. Men are like trees, and different trees help us understand different types of men. This is why God made the world he did and gave us eyes and ears and a nose and a mouth and skin. Our senses are designed to take in the world, and then our minds and hearts are designed to connect our experience of the natural world to the spiritual world and the God who governs both.

In the course of writing this book, I found the perfect opportunity to illustrate the way that our experiential knowledge of

the world through general revelation helps us to understand the Bible and thus to know God more deeply. Every year, Bethlehem College & Seminary hosts a pastors' conference in Minneapolis. *In January.* And every year a few thousand pastors and church leaders journey to the land of ice and snow in order to be encouraged through worship, teaching, and fellowship. For our brethren from the South, we know that the trip is almost a rite of passage. They get to return home and regale their congregations with stories of their exploits in the frozen tundra. "The snowdrifts were up to my waist. My eyes almost froze shut. I nearly died attempting to cross the street to scavenge for food."

In January of 2019, however, the cold went to another level. The wind chill dropped down to -45 degrees. Even for native Minnesotans, that's cold. That year I told the pastors assembled there:

You're going to go home and try to explain to your people how cold it was here. You might try to use math. You'll tell them, "You know the difference between 80 degrees and 40 degrees? It was like that temperature difference over again, and then over again—80 to 40 to 0 to -40." And they might get some idea of the cold. But you know that they won't *really* get it. You, on the other hand—you walked outside with your little Target beanie and windbreaker. Your nose hairs turned to ice in under five seconds. You lost feeling in your fingers before you made it from your car to the conference center *in the parking garage*. And because you experienced all of that, Psalm 147 now means more to you:

He sends out his command to the earth;  
his word runs swiftly.  
He gives snow like wool;  
he scatters frost like ashes.

He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;  
who can stand before his cold? (Ps. 147:15–17)

No one. No one can stand before his cold. Not you. Not me. Our experience of nature, of general revelation, has built categories in our minds so that we read Psalm 147 with fresh (and frozen) eyes.<sup>3</sup>

### A Web of Images

General revelation also works in a more *indirect* fashion. Again, Psalm 19 shows us how. When the psalmist unpacks *how* the heavens declare the glory of God, he turns to the sun as it journeys from horizon to horizon:

In them he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his  
chamber,  
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.  
(Ps. 19:4–5)

Notice that the psalmist makes two comparisons. The sun is like a bridegroom leaving his chamber and like a strong man who runs his course with joy. David looks at the sun as it moves across the sky, and then he looks at a groom on his wedding day, and he sees a connection. In the brilliance of the sun, he sees the gladness of a groom. He looks at the sun again and is reminded of Josheb-as-hebeth, one of his mighty men, running into battle with spear raised and eyes blazing (2 Sam. 23:8). The sun is like the groom, and the sun is like the warrior. It's this indirect web of images that shows us *how* the heavens declare the glory of God. The sun is bright and triumphant, the bridegroom's face is shining as he stands at the aisle, the warrior is intense but joyful since he is doing what he was built to do.



This means that reality is a web of images, pictures, patterns, analogies, and metaphors all woven together by the wisdom and skill of our Creator. Metaphors and analogies operate on a principle of comparison. We set one thing next to another thing in order to better understand them both. The sun helps us to understand weddings, and weddings in turn help us to see the sun with new eyes. Warriors help us to understand bridegrooms, and bridegrooms in turn illuminate warriors. In the psalm David recognizes the likenesses among these various things of earth. They're not identical, but they are similar. And this web is held together by Christ—in him all things hold together (Col. 1:17).

Therefore, if we want to know God through general revelation, we don't always go directly to him. Instead we move horizontally between the images, among the things of earth, understanding how they relate to each other, so that the *whole* picture and experience of the world can then lead us to God. God draws us into this web of creation so that we might know him through it. It's how he reveals himself to us in a way that fits our frame.

And notice how in each of these passages, it's something *outside* the Bible that helps us to understand *the meaning* of the Bible. If you've never seen the sun move triumphantly across the sky, then Psalm 19 doesn't *mean* anything to you. If you've never seen a fruitful tree on the edge of a river or a tumbleweed blowing across the highway into a ditch, then Psalm 1 doesn't *mean* anything to you. And the reason we hold the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors and Church Leaders in January in Minnesota is that we want those pastors to *really* know the meaning of Psalm 147. No one—and I mean *no one*—can stand before his cold.

## Keeping Our Metaphors Honest

At this point, it's worth briefly addressing obvious questions. If God communicates to us through creation by means of analogies, images, and metaphors, does that mean that any metaphor we come up with is a revelation from God? What keeps this way of thinking from going off the rails and becoming simply a way for people with fruitful imaginations to say all kinds of foolishness about God? These questions show why we need special revelation. Special revelation refers to the unique ways that God has revealed himself at particular times and places. It includes prophecy, visions, miracles, and God's mighty acts of redemption. The most important form of special revelation is the Bible, God's unique, inerrant, and authoritative word to human beings. Thus it's no surprise that Psalm 19 moves seamlessly from celebrating God's revelation in creation (19:1–6) to celebrating God's revelation in the Bible:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
    reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
    making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
    rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
    enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is clean,  
    enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
    and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
    even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
    and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward. (19:7–11)

The written, authoritative word of God is what keeps us on the right path. It keeps our metaphors and analogies in check. The law of the Lord revives the soul, makes us wise so we don't say foolish things about God, enlightens our eyes so we see God everywhere, and guards us from error. If creation is a language in which God speaks to us through sights and sounds and smells and tastes and sensations, then Scripture is the grammar textbook for that language, the language of God. Now it doesn't give us the whole language; we're not restricted to the images of the Bible. But the Bible does show us the basics; it gives us examples so we can learn how the images of divine things work and then unleashes us, by the grace of God, to find him everywhere that he is speaking. As the old hymn says:

This is my Father's world  
He shines in all that's fair  
In the rustling grass I hear him pass  
He speaks to me everywhere.

That's why biblical authors are always pointing us out to the world to learn what God is like and how to live. Are you anxious about food? Consider the birds, Jesus says. Are you worried about shelter and clothing? Consider the lilies of the field. Are you lazy? Solomon tells us to consider the ant. And then Jesus and Solomon explain the lesson that we are to learn from creation, and in doing so, they train us in careful interpretation of general revelation. They teach us how to read the world. They help us to see how general and special revelation work together to give us knowledge of God.

## The Gospel of John

Now, the best way that I know to bring these truths together is with an extended look at a particular passage of Scripture. In John 6 Jesus utters the first of seven “I am” statements in John’s Gospel: “I am the bread of life” (v. 35). Like many aspects of John’s Gospel, this is a simple statement full of rich meaning. More importantly for us, this is an example of special revelation (Jesus’s words in the Bible) showing us how to interpret general revelation (bread).

Let’s begin by setting some background. Jesus is in the midst of his ministry. He’s been gathering disciples, teaching crowds, and performing signs. Now the apostle John gives special attention to Jesus’s signs. In his book, signs have particular characteristics. Signs are public, supernatural acts that reveal Jesus to his disciples and to the crowds. They are designed either to bring about faith in Jesus as the Son of God or to harden the unbelieving. These signs are explicitly identified as such in John’s Gospel, confirm Christ’s identity as the one sent by God, and emphasize that Jesus brings life to the world using physical representation and symbols.

John seems to focus on seven particular signs. The first is when Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding (“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee,” 2:11). The second is healing an official’s son (“This was now the second sign that Jesus did,” 4:54). The third is when Jesus heals the paralytic in chapter 5. We know this is a sign because in 6:2 we’re told that a large crowd was following him because they had seen the signs he was doing on the sick. The fourth is when Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6). Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish, and “when the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet

who is to come into the world” (6:14). And because they are so amazed, they want to force him to become king. As a result, Jesus withdraws into a solitary place. Later that evening, his disciples go across the sea in a boat, and Jesus walks to them on the water, and they all make it to the other side of the sea. The next day (6:22), the people realize that Jesus is gone, so they sail across the sea, “seeking Jesus” (6:24). And that brings us to the crucial passage. So let’s walk through it, making observations as we go, and then draw a few conclusions at the end.

### **The Bread of Life**

When the crowds finally find Jesus, they ask him, “When did you come here?”

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” (6:26)

In other words, Jesus knows what these people are after. They’re not seeking him because they saw public, supernatural acts that showed his glory and called forth faith. They’re seeking him because they want more bread. They saw the sign, but they didn’t *really* see the sign. They didn’t see what the sign pointed to. All they know is that this Jesus guy can multiply bread. If they stay with him, they’ll never go hungry again. They’ll always have full bellies. Jesus continues:

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal. (6:27)

Jesus says, “You worked hard to find me. You went through a lot of effort in order to get another free lunch. But don’t just

work for food that perishes, that rots and gets moldy. Work for food that lasts, that remains, that abides to eternal life, which the Son of Man [i.e., Jesus] will give you.”

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” (6:28–30)

In other words, “Show us something. Do one of those public supernatural acts and then we’ll believe in you.” And in case Jesus can’t think of a sign to do, they have an idea:

Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” (6:31)

This is a reference to a story from the Old Testament (Ex. 16). God rescued his people, the Hebrews, from slavery in Egypt. After he did so, they were out in the desert and started to grumble and complain. “We’re starving. If only we’d stayed in Egypt. We had food there, but out here, we’re going to die.” And God graciously provided them with food. Every day they woke up to this bread-like substance on the ground. They gathered it up and had enough for one day. But if they tried to store it overnight, it bred worms and stank. It was food that perished and rotted. They had to trust God to supply it every day. They called it “manna,” which is just a Hebrew word that means “What is it?” It’s like you come out of your tent, and there’s food on the ground, but you’re not sure what it is, but you eat it, and it fills your belly, and then you name it “Whatchamacallit.” The point is that God provided magic bread from heaven to his people in the wilderness.

Now Jesus shows up and multiplies bread like magic, and the people think, “Yes! Lunchtime! A new Moses! He gave our fathers bread from heaven to eat; now you give us bread from heaven to eat.”

Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” (John 6:32–34)

The people are fixated on filling their bellies, their natural appetite, and Jesus is trying to show them a different kind of bread. He’s trying to take them deeper. They’re saying, “Give us bread like Moses did.” And Jesus says, “Actually Moses didn’t give it to you; God did. And he wants to give you true bread from heaven, which is the person who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” But they’re not really getting it, so they say, “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just give us this magic bread always.” And then he gets explicit about what he means:

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in

him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (6:35–40)

And then they start grumbling because he’s not multiplying magic bread but saying that he himself is the bread. And they say, “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph? We know his mom and dad. How can he say, ‘I’ve come down from heaven?’” (see 6:41–42). Then:

Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (6:43–51)

In other words, “Don’t stumble over the sign. I’m the real bread. I don’t just want to fill your belly for a few hours. I want to give you eternal life. I want you to come to me and eat the bread of life. I want you to eat living bread, to feast on me, and be truly satisfied forever.”

After this, they start arguing among themselves—“What’s this guy talking about?” (see 6:52). Jesus tries to explain some more, but then a number of these followers say, “We don’t get it. This is too hard and complicated. We’re out” (see 6:60, 66). And they turn back and no longer follow him.



## What Does Bread Declare?

We can see four key truths in this story that are relevant for this book. First, as we've seen, creation is designed by God to show us what he is like. Or, to be more specific, creation is designed to reveal who Jesus is. God has designed the entire universe to reveal Jesus. Long before you and I existed, long before Jesus came in the flesh, before the Bible was written down, from the very beginning God invented something called "hunger" and something called "bread" so that some day, when Jesus showed up, we would have categories for understanding who he is. In other words, when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," he's not finding or discovering a convenient metaphor. He's revealing the main reason that bread exists. Every growling stomach, every empty belly, every hearty meal, every satisfied hunger in the history of the world has been leading to the moment when Jesus shows up and people ask, "Who are you?" and he replies, "I am the bread of life."

Second, in this case, it's not merely that God's creation reveals who Jesus is. Human culture reveals who Jesus is. Jesus says that he is the *bread* of life, not the *grain* of life. Grain is something that God makes. Bread is something that people make out of the grain that God makes. That's what culture is—a mixture of God's creation and man's creativity. And this tells us that not only is creation designed to reveal God, but human culture is also capable of showing us what God is like. When we faithfully mingle our creative labor with God's creation, we glorify the things of earth. Bread is grain, but glorified through man's efforts. Wine is grapes, but glorified through man's efforts. While human culture is fallen and broken by sin, it is still able to be a reflection of divine wisdom and glory so that we can know who Jesus is and how we should relate to him.

Third, not only does God design reality and weave his creation and human culture together so that they reveal Jesus, but he orchestrates the history of redemption in order to reveal Jesus. By saying, “I am the bread of life,” Jesus doesn’t simply tap into the universal experience of hunger; he connects himself to the particular history of Israel. God’s mighty acts in history and the record of those acts in the Bible all point to Christ. Why did God give his people *Whatchamacallit* in the wilderness? To feed them, yes. To keep them alive in a desert, yes. But, ultimately, he gave them bread from heaven so that one day Jesus could say, “I am the true bread that comes down from heaven. That story points to me. It creates a category in your mind so that you know how you should relate to me.”

Finally, Jesus’s words in John 6 echo in our minds and hearts every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper. Theologians have often described the Lord’s Supper as an edible word. Jesus is the bread of life. The bread at the Lord’s Table is his body, just as the wine is his blood. At the table, God offers us special grace in the bread and wine that we receive by faith. But the special grace of the Lord’s Supper flows outward to the rest of our lives. It reminds us that God’s invisible attributes are revealed everywhere—in creation, in human culture, in God’s mighty works of redemption. All of reality is a display of God and an invitation to know God. In showing us what God is like, the world beckons us further up and further in so that we can know *him* and love *him* and enjoy *him* through the things he has made.

**PUMPKIN CRUNCH CAKE.** Game night with friends. Jazz music. Baseball. These are good gifts—and potential threats to the worship of God.

At the heart of the Christian life is a tension between the supremacy of God over all things and the enjoyment of all things for his sake. In this short book, Joe Rigney offers a biblical vision for enjoying God in everything and enjoying everything in God. God's gifts are invitations to know and enjoy him more deeply, and as this truth is impressed upon our hearts, we will discover that the things of earth grow strangely bright in the light of his glory and grace.

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*"God's passion for his glory and our ache to be truly happy are not at odds but rather one life-changing pursuit. And so too with God himself and the world he made—God means for us to enjoy him in everything, and everything in him."*

**David Mathis**, Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); Pastor, Cities Church, St. Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

*"Joe follows Scripture's example by teaching us how to read the world, the creation, and the gifts of God under the authority of the word of God. This is an important book and I hope you'll read it."*

**Abigail Dodds**, author, *(A)Typical Woman*

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