

Desiring God

DESIRING
GOD

JOHN PIPER

DESIRING GOD

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To

WILLIAM SOLOMON HOTTLE PIPER,

my father,
in whom
I have seen
the holiness and happiness
of God.

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What's New in the 2003 Edition?

Two New Appendixes:

Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be?
Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees

How Then Shall We Fight for Joy? An Outline

Updated References to Statistics and Literature

New Illustrations and Quotations

Corrections and Clarifications

Incorporated ESV Translation into Scripture Citations

Converted All Endnotes to Footnotes

PREFACE

There is a kind of happiness and wonder that makes you serious.

C. S. LEWIS

The Last Battle

This is a serious book about being happy in God. It's about happiness because that is what our Creator commands: "Delight yourself in the LORD" (Psalm 37:4). And it is serious because, as Jeremy Taylor said, "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy."

The heroes of this book are *Jesus Christ*, who "endured the cross for the joy that was set before him"; and *St. Paul*, who was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"; and *Jonathan Edwards*, who deeply savored the sweet sovereignty of God; and *C. S. Lewis*, who knew that the Lord "finds our desires not too strong but too weak"; and all the *missionaries* who have left everything for Christ and in the end said, "I never made a sacrifice."

Seventeen years have passed since *Desiring God* first appeared. The significance of a truth is judged in part by whether over time it has transforming power in very different circumstances. What about the message of this book? Since its first edition in 1986, my body has passed from a forty-year-old body to a fifty-seven-year-old body. My marriage has advanced from a

seventeen-year-old marriage to a thirty-four-year-old marriage. My pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church has persisted from six years to almost twenty-three years. My oldest son has grown from thirteen and single to thirty and married, making me a grandfather twice over. In a few months all of our four sons will be out of the teenage years. In 1986 there were no daughters. Now there is Talitha Ruth, whom we adopted at nine weeks in December of 1995.

In other words, things have changed. But not my commitment to the message of this book. It is my life. That *God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him* continues to be a spectacular and precious truth in my mind and heart. It has sustained me into my second half-century, and I do not doubt that it will carry me Home.

I have added a chapter called “Suffering: The Sacrifice of Christian Hedonism.” The reason is partly biblical, partly global, and partly autobiographical. Biblically, it is plain that God has appointed suffering for all His children: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Globally, it is increasingly plain that a bold stand for the uniqueness of Christ crucified, not to mention the finishing of the great commission among hostile peoples, will cost the church suffering and martyrs. The post-9/11 world is marked with terror. If Christian Hedonism is to have any credibility, it must give an account of itself in this world of fear and suffering. Increasingly, I am drawn to the apostle’s experience described in the words “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Autobiographically, the years since the first edition of *Desiring God* have been the hardest. The body ages and things go wrong. Marriage, we found, passes through deep water as husband and wife pass through midlife. We made it. But we will not diminish the disquietude of those years. We were not ashamed to seek help. God was good to us. Moving through our sixth decade of life and our fourth decade of marriage, the roots are deep, the covenant is solid, the love is sweet. Life is hard and God is good.

The other “marriage” in my life (with Bethlehem Baptist Church) has been

a mingling of heartache and happiness. Can so much devastation and so much delight coexist in one community and one soul? It can. The apostle Paul spoke a deep pastoral reality when he said, “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation” (2 Corinthians 1:6). But there is a joy without which pastors cannot profit their people (Hebrews 13:17). Mercifully, God has preserved it for twenty-two years. And the truth of this book has been His means.

During these seventeen years since *Desiring God* first appeared, I have been testing it and applying its vision in connection with more of life and ministry and God. The more I do so, the more persuaded I become that it will bear all the weight I can put on it.¹ The more I reflect and the more I minister and the more I live, the more all-encompassing the vision of God and life in this book becomes.

The older I get, the more I am persuaded that Nehemiah 8:10 is crucial for living and dying well: “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” As we grow older and our bodies weaken, we must learn from the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter (who died in 1691) to redouble our efforts to find strength from spiritual joy, not natural supplies. He prayed, “May the Living God, who is the portion and rest of the saints, make these our carnal minds so spiritual, and our earthly hearts so heavenly, that loving him, and *delighting in him, may be the work of our lives.*”² When delighting in God is the work of our lives (which I call Christian Hedonism), there will be an inner strength for ministries of love to the very end.

J. I. Packer described this dynamic in Baxter’s life: “The hope of heaven brought him joy, and joy brought him strength, and so, like John Calvin before him and George Whitefield after him (two verifiable examples) and, it would seem, like the apostle Paul himself...he was astoundingly enabled to labor on, accomplishing more than would ever have seemed possible in a single lifetime.”³

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1. If you wish, you can test this for yourself by consulting the books in which I have tried to apply the vision of this book to the nature of God (*The Pleasures of God*, Multnomah, 2000); the gravity and gladness of preaching (*The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Baker, 1990); the power and the price of world evangelization (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, Baker, 2003); the meaning of marriage (*What’s the Difference?* Crossway, 1990); the daily battle against unbelief and sin (*The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, Multnomah, 1995); the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer (*A Hunger for God*, Crossway, 1997), a hundred practical issues in life and culture (*A Godward Life, Books One and Two*, Multnomah, 1997, 1999), and the radical call to pastoral ministry (*Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, Broadman & Holman, 2002).
 2. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978), 17, emphasis added.
 3. J. I. Packer, “Richard Baxter on Heaven, Hope and Holiness,” in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 165.

But not only does the pursuit of joy in God give strength to endure; it is the key to breaking the power of sin on our way to heaven. Matthew Henry, another Puritan pastor, put it like this: “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.”⁴

This is the great business of life—to “put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.” I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term than to gain a distaste for it because of a superior satisfaction in God. One of the reasons this book is still “working” after seventeen years is that this truth simply does not and will not change. God remains gloriously all-satisfying. The human heart remains a ceaseless factory of desires. Sin remains powerfully and suicidally appealing. The battle remains: Where will we drink? Where will we feast? Therefore, *Desiring God* is still a compelling and urgent message: Feast on God.

I never tire of saying and savoring the truth that God’s passion to be glorified and our passion to be satisfied are *one* experience in the Christ-exalting act of worship—singing in the sanctuary and suffering in the streets. Baxter said it like this:

[God’s] glorifying himself and the saving of his people are not two decrees with God, but one decree, to glorify his mercy in their salvation, though we may say that one is the end of the other: so I think they should be with us together indeed.⁵

We get the mercy; He gets the glory. We get the happiness in Him; He gets the honor from us.

If God would be pleased to use this book to raise up one man or woman in this line of serious and happy saints who inspired it, then those of us who have rejoiced in the making of this book would delight all the more in the display of

4. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., orig. 1708), 1096.
5. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, abr. John T. Wilkinson (1650; reprint, London: Epworth, 1962), 31.

God's grace. It has indeed been a happy work. And my heart overflows to many.

Steve Halliday believed in the book from the beginning. If he hadn't asked to see the sermons in 1983, there would be no *Desiring God*.

I remain ever in debt to Daniel Fuller in all I do. It was in his class in 1968 that the seminal discoveries were made. It was from him that I learned how to dig for gold rather than rake for leaves when I take up the Scriptures. He remains a treasured friend and teacher.

Carol Steinbach was willing again to tackle the indexes and give the book her sharp editorial attention. I do not take the constancy of friendships for granted.

The church that I love and serve heard the chapters in sermon form back in 1983. Of course the length has quadrupled since then. And they have not begrudged my labor! The partnership that I enjoy with the elders and staff is priceless. There is a chapter yet to be written. It is called "The Camaraderie of Christian Hedonism." May the Spirit Himself write it on the tablets of our hearts!

More than anyone else, under God, this new edition is owing to the labor of Justin Taylor, who works side by side with me in *Desiring God Ministries*. Justin combed the entire manuscript, making hundreds of suggestions for corrections, updates, additions, subtractions, and clarifications. I could not have done this without his help. And, lest it go unsaid from being obvious, nothing happens without Noël. She supports in so many ways that I lean on her like gravity and oxygen. We should give thanks for these more often.

Finally, a word to my father. The dedicatory words I wrote in 1986 are still true seventeen years later. I look back through forty-five years and see mother at the dinner table, laughing so hard that the tears run down her face. She was a very happy woman. But especially when you came home on Monday. You had been gone two weeks. Or sometimes three or four. She would glow on Monday mornings when you were coming home.

At the dinner table that night (these were the happiest of times in my memory) we would hear about the victories of the gospel. Surely it is more exciting to be the son of an evangelist than to sit with knights and warriors. As I

grew older, I saw more of the wounds. But you spared me most of that until I was mature enough to “count it all joy.” Holy and happy were those Monday meals. Oh, how good it was to have you home!

John Piper

2003

Minneapolis, Minnesota

“It was good of you to look for Quentin.”
“Good!” she exclaimed. “Good! O Anthony!”
“Well, so it was,” he answered. “Or good in you.
How accurate one has to be with one’s prepositions!
Perhaps it was a preposition wrong that set the whole world awry.”

CHARLES WILLIAMS

The Place of the Lion

HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

You might turn the world on its head by changing one word in your creed. The old tradition says:

*The chief end of man is to glorify God
and
enjoy Him forever.*

And? Like ham *and* eggs? Sometimes you glorify God *and* sometimes you enjoy Him? Sometimes He gets glory, sometimes you get joy? *And* is a very ambiguous word! Just how do these two things relate to each other?

Evidently, the old theologians didn't think they were talking about two things. They said "chief end," not "chief ends." Glorifying God and enjoying Him were one end in their minds, not two. How can that be?

That's what this book is about.

Not that I care too much about the intention of seventeenth-century theologians. But I care tremendously about the intention of God in Scripture. What does God have to say about the chief end of man? How does God teach us to give Him glory? Does He command us to enjoy Him? If so, how does this quest

for joy in God relate to everything else? Yes, everything! “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The overriding concern of this book is that in all of life God be glorified the way He Himself has appointed. To that end this book aims to persuade you that

The chief end of man is to glorify God

by

enjoying Him forever.

HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

When I was in college, I had a vague, pervasive notion that if I did something good because it would make me happy, I would ruin its goodness.

I figured that the goodness of my moral action was lessened to the degree that I was motivated by a desire for my own pleasure. At the time, buying ice cream in the student center just for pleasure didn't bother me, because the moral consequences of that action seemed so insignificant. But to be motivated by a desire for happiness or pleasure when I volunteered for Christian service or went to church—that seemed selfish, utilitarian, mercenary.

This was a problem for me because I couldn't formulate an alternative motive that worked. I found in myself an overwhelming longing to be happy, a tremendously powerful impulse to seek pleasure, yet at every point of moral decision I said to myself that this impulse should have no influence.

One of the most frustrating areas was that of worship and praise. My vague notion that the higher the activity, the less there must be of self-interest in it caused me to think of worship almost solely in terms of duty. And that cuts the heart out of it.

Then I was converted to Christian Hedonism. In a matter of weeks I came to see that it is unbiblical and arrogant to try to worship God for any other reason than the pleasure to be had in Him. (Don't miss those last two words: *in Him*. Not His gifts, but Him. Not ourselves, but Him.) Let me describe the series of insights that made me a Christian Hedonist. Along the way, I hope it will become clear what I mean by this strange phrase.

1. During my first quarter in seminary, I was introduced to the argument for Christian Hedonism and one of its great exponents, Blaise Pascal. He wrote:

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.¹

This statement so fit with my own deep longings, and all that I had ever seen in others, that I accepted it and have never found any reason to doubt it. What struck me especially was that Pascal was not making any moral judgment about this fact. As far as he was concerned, seeking one's own happiness is not a sin; it is a simple given in human nature. It is a law of the human heart, as gravity is a law of nature.

This thought made great sense to me and opened the way for the second discovery.

2. I had grown to love the works of C. S. Lewis in college. But not until later did I buy the sermon called "The Weight of Glory." The first page of that sermon is one of the most influential pages of literature I have ever read. It goes like this:

If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative ideal of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves,

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 113, thought #425.

as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²

There it was in black and white, and to my mind it was totally compelling: It is not a bad thing to desire our own good. In fact, the great problem of human beings is that they are far too easily pleased. They don't seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and passion that they should. And so they settle for mud pies of appetite instead of infinite delight.

I had never in my whole life heard any Christian, let alone a Christian of Lewis's stature, say that all of us not only seek (as Pascal said), but also *ought to seek*, our own happiness. Our mistake lies not in the intensity of our desire for happiness, but in the weakness of it.

3. The third insight was there in Lewis's sermon, but Pascal made it more explicit. He goes on to say:

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 1–2.

There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.³

As I look back on it now, it seems so patently obvious that I don't know how I could have missed it. All those years I had been trying to suppress my tremendous longing for happiness so I could honestly praise God out of some "higher," less selfish motive. But now it started to dawn on me that this persistent and undeniable yearning for happiness was not to be suppressed, but to be glutted—on God! The growing conviction that praise should be motivated solely by the happiness we find in God seemed less and less strange.

4. The next insight came again from C. S. Lewis, but this time from his *Reflections on the Psalms*. Chapter 9 of Lewis's book bears the modest title "A Word about Praise." In my experience it has been *the* word about praise—the best word on the nature of praise I have ever read.

Lewis says that as he was beginning to believe in God, a great stumbling block was the presence of demands scattered through the Psalms that he should praise God. He did not see the point in all this; besides, it seemed to picture God as craving "for our worship like a vain woman who wants compliments." He goes on to show why he was wrong:

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game....

3. Pascal, *Pensees*, 113.

My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.⁴

This was the capstone of my emerging Hedonism. Praising God, the highest calling of humanity and our eternal vocation, did not involve the renunciation, but rather the consummation of the joy I so desired. My old effort to achieve worship with no self-interest in it proved to be a contradiction in terms. God is not worshiped where He is not treasured and enjoyed. Praise is not an alternative to joy, but the expression of joy. Not to enjoy God is to dishonor Him. To say to Him that something else satisfies you more is the opposite of worship. It is sacrilege.

I saw this not only in C. S. Lewis, but also in the eighteenth-century pastor Jonathan Edwards. No one had ever taught me that God is glorified by our joy in Him. That joy in God is the very thing that makes praise an honor to God, and not hypocrisy. But Edwards said it so clearly and powerfully:

God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to...their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself... *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it... He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.⁵

4. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 94–5.

5. Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 495, miscellany #448, emphasis added. See also #87 (pp. 251–2); #332 (p. 410); #679 (not in the New Haven volume).

This was a stunning discovery for me. I *must* pursue joy in God if I am to glorify Him as the surpassingly valuable Reality in the universe. Joy is not a mere option alongside worship. It is an essential component of worship.⁶

We have a name for those who try to praise when they have no pleasure in the object. We call them hypocrites. This fact—that praise means consummate pleasure and that the highest end of man is to drink deeply of this pleasure—was perhaps the most liberating discovery I ever made.

5. Then I turned to the Psalms for myself and found the language of Hedonism everywhere. The quest for pleasure was not even optional, but commanded: “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

The psalmists sought to do just this: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1–2). “My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). The motif of thirsting has its satisfying counterpart when the psalmist says that men “drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights” (Psalm 36:8, NASB).

I found that the goodness of God, the very foundation of worship, is not a thing you pay your respects to out of some kind of disinterested reverence. No, it is something to be enjoyed: “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Psalm 34:8). “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103).

As C. S. Lewis says, God in the Psalms is the “all-satisfying Object.” His people adore Him unashamedly for the “exceeding joy” they find in Him (Psalm 43:4). He is the source of complete and unending pleasure: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

That is the short story of how I became a Christian Hedonist. I have now been brooding over these things for some thirty-five years, and there has emerged

6. I will deal in chapter 10 with the place of sadness in the Christian life and how it can be a part of worship, which is never perfect in this age. True evangelical brokenness for sin is a sadness experienced only by those who taste the pleasures of God’s goodness and feel the regret that they do not savor it as fully as they ought.

a philosophy that touches virtually every area of my life. I believe that it is biblical, that it fulfills the deepest longings of my heart, and that it honors the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have written this book to commend these things to all who will listen.

Many objections rise in people's minds when they hear me talk this way. I hope the book will answer the most serious problems. But perhaps I can defuse some of the resistance in advance by making a few brief, clarifying comments.

First, Christian Hedonism as I use the term does not mean God becomes a means to help us get worldly pleasures. The pleasure Christian Hedonism seeks is the pleasure that is in God Himself. He is the end of our search, not the means to some further end. Our exceeding joy is He, the Lord—not the streets of gold or the reunion with relatives or any blessing of heaven. Christian Hedonism does not reduce God to a key that unlocks a treasure chest of gold and silver. Rather, it seeks to transform the heart so that “the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver” (Job 22:25).

Second, Christian Hedonism does not make a god out of pleasure. It says that one has already made a god out of whatever he finds most pleasure in. The goal of Christian Hedonism is to find most pleasure in the one and only God and thus avoid the sin of covetousness, that is, idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Third, Christian Hedonism does not put us above God when we seek Him out of self-interest. A patient is not greater than his physician. I will say more about this in chapter 3.

Fourth, Christian Hedonism is not a “general theory of *moral justification*.”⁷ In other words, nowhere do I say: An act is right because it brings pleasure. My aim is not to decide what is right by using joy as a moral criterion. My aim is to own up to the amazing, and largely neglected, fact that some dimension of joy is a moral duty in all true worship and all virtuous acts. I do not say that loving God is good because it brings joy. I say that God commands

7. One of the most extended and serious critiques of Christian Hedonism to appear since *Desiring God* was first published is in Richard Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990). The quotation is taken from p. 33 (emphasis added).

that we find joy in loving God: “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Psalm 37:4). I do not say that loving people is good because it brings joy. I say that God commands that we find joy in loving people: “[Let] the one who does acts of mercy [do so] with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:8).⁸

I do not come to the Bible with a hedonistic theory of moral justification. On the contrary, I find in the Bible a divine command to be a pleasure-seeker—that is, to forsake the two-bit, low-yield, short-term, never-satisfying, person-destroying, God-belittling pleasures of the world and to sell everything “with joy” (Matthew 13:44) in order to have the kingdom of heaven and thus “enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21, 23). In short, I am a Christian Hedonist not for any philosophical or theoretical reason, but because God commands it (though He doesn’t command that you use these labels!).

Fifth, I do not say that the relationship between love and happiness is this: “True happiness requires love.” This is an oversimplification that misses the crucial and defining point. The distinguishing feature of Christian Hedonism is not that pleasure seeking demands virtue, but that virtue consists essentially, though not only, in pleasure seeking.

The reason I come to this conclusion is that I am operating here not as a philosophical hedonist, but as a biblical theologian and pastor who must come to terms with divine commands:

- to “love mercy,” not just *do* it (Micah 6:8, KJV),
- to do “acts of mercy, *with cheerfulness*” (Romans 12:8),
- to “*joyfully*” suffer loss in the service of prisoners (Hebrews 10:34),
- to be a *cheerful* giver (2 Corinthians 9:7),
- to make *our joy* the joy of others (2 Corinthians 2:3),
- to tend the flock of God willingly and “*eagerly*” (1 Peter 5:2), and
- to keep watch over souls “*with joy*” (Hebrews 13:17).

8. Additional texts revealing the God-given duty of joy in God include Deuteronomy 28:47; 1 Chronicles 16:31, 33; Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 32:11; 33:1; 35:9; 40:8, 16; 42:1–2; 63:1, 11; 64:10; 95:1; 97:1, 12; 98:4; 104:34; 105:3; Isaiah 41:16; Joel 2:23; Zechariah 2:10; 10:7, Philippians 3:1; 4:4. Additional texts mentioning the divine command of joy in loving others include 2 Corinthians 9:7 (cf. Acts 20:35); Hebrews 10:34; 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2.

When you reflect long and hard on such amazing commands, the moral implications are stunning. Christian Hedonism attempts to take these divine commands with blood-earnestness. The upshot is piercing and radically life changing: The pursuit of true virtue includes the pursuit of the joy because joy is an essential component of true virtue. This is vastly different from saying, “Let’s all be good because it will make us happy.”

Sixth, Christian Hedonism is not a distortion of historic Reformed catechisms of faith. This was one of the criticisms of Richard Mouw in his book, *The God Who Commands*:

Piper might be able to alter the first answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism—so that glorifying *and* enjoying God becomes glorifying *by* enjoying the deity—to suit his hedonistic purposes, but it is a little more difficult to alter the opening lines of the Heidelberg Catechism: That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.⁹

The remarkable thing about the beginning of the Heidelberg Catechism is not that I can’t change it for hedonistic purposes, but that I don’t have to. It already places the entire catechism under the human longing for “comfort.” Question one: “What is your only *comfort* in life and death?” The pressing question for critics of Christian Hedonism is: Why did the original framers of the four-hundred-year-old catechism structure all 129 questions so that they are an exposition of the question “What is my only comfort?”

Even more remarkable is to see the concern with “happiness” emerge explicitly in the second question of the catechism, which provides the outlines for the rest of the catechism. The second question is: “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou in this *comfort* (*Troste*) mayest live and die *happily* (*seliglich*)?” Thus, the entire catechism is an answer to the concern for how to live and die *happily*.

9. Mouw, *The God Who Commands*, 36.

The answer to the second question of the catechism is: “Three things: first, the greatness of my sin and misery; second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.” Then the rest of the catechism is divided into three sections to deal with these three things: “The First Part: Of Man’s Misery” (questions 3–11); “The Second Part: Of Man’s Redemption” (questions 12–85); and “The Third Part: Of Thankfulness” (questions 86–129). What this means is that *the entire Heidelberg Catechism is written to answer the question “What must I know to live happily?”*

I am puzzled that anyone would think that Christian Hedonism needs to “alter the opening lines to the Heidelberg Catechism.” The fact is, the entire catechism is structured the way Christian Hedonism would structure it. Therefore, Christian Hedonism does not distort the historic Reformed catechisms. Both the Westminster Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism begin with a concern for man’s enjoyment of God, or his quest to “live and die happily.” I have no desire to be doctrinally novel. I am glad that the Heidelberg Catechism was written four hundred years ago.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN HEDONISM

Fresh ways of looking at the world (even when they are centuries old) do not lend themselves to simple definitions. A whole book is needed so people can begin to catch on. Quick and superficial judgments will almost certainly be wrong. Beware of conjecture about what lies in the pages of this book! The surmise that here we have another spin-off from modern man’s enslavement to the centrality of himself will be very wide of the mark. Ah, what surprises lie ahead!

For many, the term *Christian Hedonism* will be new. Therefore, I have included appendix 5: “Why Call It Christian Hedonism?” If this is a strange or troubling term, you may want to read those pages before plunging into the main chapters.

I would prefer to reserve a definition of Christian Hedonism until the end of the book, when misunderstandings would have been swept away. A writer often wishes his first sentence could be read in light of his last—and vice versa! But, alas, one must begin somewhere. So I offer the following

advance definition in hope that it will be interpreted sympathetically in light of the rest of the book.

Christian Hedonism is a philosophy of life built on the following five convictions:

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.
2. We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy, as though it were a bad impulse. Instead, we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.
3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.
4. The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.
5. To the extent that we try to abandon the pursuit of our own pleasure, we fail to honor God and love people. Or, to put it positively: The pursuit of pleasure is a necessary part of all worship and virtue. That is:

The chief end of man is to glorify God

by

enjoying Him forever.

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

This book will be predominantly a meditation on Scripture. It will be expository rather than speculative. If I cannot show that Christian Hedonism comes from the Bible, I do not expect anyone to be interested, let alone persuaded. There are a thousand man-made philosophies of life. If this is another, let it pass. There is only one rock: the Word of God. Only one thing ultimately matters: glorifying God the way He has appointed. That is why I am a Christian Hedonist. That is why I wrote this book.

*Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases.*

PSALM 115:3

*There has been a wonderful alteration in my mind,
in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty... The doctrine
has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet.
Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.*

JONATHAN EDWARDS

*The climax of God's happiness
is the delight He takes
in the echoes of His excellence
in the praises of His people.*

JOHN PIPER

THE HAPPINESS OF GOD

Foundation for Christian Hedonism

The ultimate ground of Christian Hedonism is the fact that God is uppermost in His own affections:

*The chief end of God is to glorify God
and enjoy Himself forever.*

The reason this may sound strange is that we are more accustomed to think about our duty than God's design. And when we do ask about God's design, we are too prone to describe it with ourselves at the center of God's affections. We may say, for example, that His design is to redeem the world. Or to save sinners. Or to restore creation. Or the like.

But God's saving designs are penultimate, not ultimate. Redemption, salvation, and restoration are not God's ultimate goal. These He performs for the sake of something greater: namely, the enjoyment He has in glorifying Himself. The bedrock foundation of Christian Hedonism is not God's allegiance to us, but to Himself.

If God were not infinitely devoted to the preservation, display, and enjoyment of His own glory, we could have no hope of finding happiness in Him.

But if He does in fact employ all His sovereign power and infinite wisdom to maximize the enjoyment of His own glory, then we have a foundation on which to stand and rejoice.

I know this is perplexing at first glance. So I will try to take it apart a piece at a time, and then put it back together at the end of the chapter.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY: THE FOUNDATION OF HIS HAPPINESS AND OURS

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115:3). The implication of this text is that God has the right and power to do whatever makes Him happy. That is what it means to say that God is sovereign.

Think about it for a moment: If God is sovereign and can do anything He pleases, then none of His purposes can be frustrated.

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations. (Psalm 33:10–11)

And if none of His purposes can be frustrated, then He must be the happiest of all beings. This infinite, divine happiness is the fountain from which the Christian Hedonist drinks and longs to drink more deeply.

Can you imagine what it would be like if the God who ruled the world were not happy? What if God were given to grumbling and pouting and depression, like some Jack-and-the-beanstalk giant in the sky? What if God were frustrated and despondent and gloomy and dismal and discontented and dejected? Could we join David and say, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1)?

I don't think so. We would all relate to God like little children who have a frustrated, gloomy, dismal, discontented father. They can't enjoy him. They can only try not to bother him, or maybe try to work for him to earn some little favor.

Therefore if God is not a happy God, Christian Hedonism has no founda-

tion. For the aim of the Christian Hedonist is to be happy in God, to delight in God, to cherish and enjoy His fellowship and favor. But children cannot enjoy the fellowship of their Father if He is unhappy. Therefore the foundation of Christian Hedonism is the happiness of God.

But the foundation of the happiness of God is the sovereignty of God: “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115:3). If God were not sovereign, if the world He made were out of control, frustrating His design again and again, God would not be happy.

Just as our joy is based on the promise that God is strong enough and wise enough to make all things work together for our good, so God’s joy is based on that same sovereign control: He makes all things work together for His glory.

If so much hangs on God’s sovereignty, we should make sure the biblical basis for it is secure.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR GOD’S SOVEREIGN HAPPINESS¹

The sheer fact that God is God implies that His purposes cannot be thwarted—so says the prophet Isaiah:

“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” (Isaiah 46:9–10)

The purposes of God cannot be frustrated; there is none like God. If a purpose of God came to naught, it would imply that there is a power greater than God’s. It would imply that someone could stay His hand when He designs to do a thing. But “none can stay his hand,” as Nebuchadnezzar says:

1. For a much fuller defense of God’s sovereignty in all that He does, see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000), 47–75, 121–55 and *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1993). See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan), 315–54; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, Theology of Lordship Series (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 47–79, 274–88, 313–39, and the relevant chapters in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000).

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:34–35)

HIS SOVEREIGNTY COVERS CALAMITIES

This was also Job’s final confession after God had spoken to him out of the whirlwind: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115:3).

This raises the question whether the evil and calamitous events in the world are also part of God’s sovereign design. Jeremiah looks over the carnage of Jerusalem after its destruction and cries:

My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. (Lamentations 2:11)

But when he looked to God, he could not deny the truth:

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? (3:37–38)

“SHALL WE RECEIVE GOOD FROM GOD AND NOT EVIL?”

If God reigns as sovereign over the world, then the evil of the world is not outside His design: “Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6).

This was the reverent saying of God's servant Job when he was afflicted with boils: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). He said this even though the text says plainly that "Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores" (Job 2:7). Was Job wrong to attribute to God what came from Satan? No, because the writer tells us immediately after Job's words: "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

The evil Satan causes is only by the permission of God. Therefore, Job is not wrong to see it as ultimately from the hand of God. It would be unbiblical and irreverent to attribute to Satan (or to sinful man) the power to frustrate the designs of God.

WHO PLANNED THE MURDER OF CHRIST?

The clearest example that even moral evil fits into the designs of God is the crucifixion of Christ. Who would deny that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was a morally evil act?

Yet in Acts 2:23, Peter says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The betrayal was sin, but it was part of God's ordained plan. Sin did not thwart His plan or stay His hand.

Or who would say that Herod's contempt (Luke 23:11) or Pilate's spineless expediency (Luke 23:24) or the Jews' "Crucify, crucify him!" (Luke 23:21) or the Gentile soldiers' mockery (Luke 23:36)—who would say that these were not sin? Yet Luke, in Acts 4:27–28, records the prayer of the saints:

Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

People lift their hand to rebel against the Most High only to find that their rebellion is unwitting service in the wonderful designs of God. Even sin cannot frustrate the purposes of the Almighty. He Himself does not commit sin, but

He has decreed that there be acts that are sin,² for the acts of Pilate and Herod were predestined by God's plan.

GOD TURNS IT WHEREVER HE WILL

Similarly, when we come to the end of the New Testament and to the end of history in the Revelation of John, we find God in complete control of all the evil kings who wage war. In Revelation 17, John speaks of a harlot sitting on a beast with ten horns. The harlot is Rome, drunk with the blood of the saints; the beast is the Antichrist; and the ten horns are ten kings who "hand over their power and authority to the beast...[and] make war on the Lamb" (vv. 13–14).

But are these evil kings outside God's control? Are they frustrating God's designs? Far from it. They are unwittingly doing His bidding: "For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled" (Revelation 17:17). No one on earth can escape the sovereign control of God: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1; cf. Ezra 6:22).

The evil intentions of men cannot frustrate the decrees of God. This is the point of the story of Joseph's fall and rise in Egypt. His brothers sold him into slavery. Potiphar's wife slandered him into the dungeon. Pharaoh's butler forgot him in prison for two years. Where was God in all this sin and misery? Joseph answers in Genesis 50:20. He says to his guilty brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

The hardened disobedience of men's hearts leads not to the frustration of God's plans, but to their fruition.

Consider the hardness of heart in Romans 11:25–26: "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved." Who is governing the coming and

2. For an explanation and defense of this statement, see appendix 3, "Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be? Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees."

going of this hardness of heart so that it has a particular limit, and then gives way at the appointed time to the certain salvation of “all Israel”?

Or consider the disobedience in Romans 11:31. Paul speaks to his Gentile readers about Israel’s disobedience in rejecting their Messiah: “So they [Israel] too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you [Gentiles] they also may now receive mercy.” When Paul says that Israel was disobedient in order that Gentiles might get the benefits of the gospel, whose purpose does He have in mind?

It could only be God’s. For Israel certainly did not conceive of their disobedience as a way of blessing the Gentiles—or winning mercy for themselves in such a roundabout fashion! Is not then the point of Romans 11:31 that God rules over the disobedience of Israel and turns it precisely to the purposes He has planned?

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS MERE COINCIDENCE

God’s sovereignty over men’s affairs is not compromised even by the reality of sin and evil in the world. It is not limited to the good acts of men or the pleasant events of nature. The wind belongs to God whether it comforts or whether it kills.

For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses. (Psalm 135:5–7)

In the end, one must finally come to see that if there is a God in heaven, there is no such thing as mere coincidence, not even in the smallest affairs of life: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33). Not one sparrow “will fall to the ground without your Father’s will” (Matthew 10:29, RSV).

THE STRUGGLE AND SOLUTION OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Many of us have gone through a period of deep struggle with the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. If we take our doctrines into our hearts where they belong,

they can cause upheavals of emotion and sleepless nights. This is far better than toying with academic ideas that never touch real life. The possibility at least exists that out of the upheavals will come a new era of calm and confidence.

It has happened for many of us the way it did for Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was a pastor and a profound theologian in New England in the early 1700s. He was a leader in the First Great Awakening. His major works still challenge great minds of our day. His extraordinary combination of logic and love make him a deeply moving writer. Again and again when I am dry and weak, I pull down my collection of Edwards's works and stir myself up with one of his sermons.³

He recounts the struggle he had with the doctrine of God's sovereignty:

From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty.... It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God....

But never could I give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced, not in the least imagining at the time, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it. However, my mind rested in it; and it put an end to all those cavils and objections.

And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found so much as the rising of an objection against it, in the most absolute sense.... I have often since had not only a conviction but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.⁴

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3. The most accessible version of Edwards's works is *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., published both by Banner of Truth and Hendrickson. The complete works are being published in individual volumes by Yale University Press.
 4. Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, ed. C. H. Faust and T. H. Johnson (New York: Hill & Wang, 1962), 58–9.

It is not surprising, then, that Jonathan Edwards struggled earnestly and deeply with the problem that stands before us now. How can we affirm the happiness of God on the basis of His sovereignty when much of what God permits in the world is contrary to His own commands in Scripture? How can we say God is happy when there is so much sin and misery in the world?

Edwards did not claim to exhaust the mystery here. But he does help us find a possible way of avoiding outright contradiction while being faithful to the Scriptures. To put it in my own words, he said that the infinite complexity of the divine mind is such that God has the capacity to look at the world through two lenses. He can look through a narrow lens or through a wide-angle lens.

When God looks at a painful or wicked event through His narrow lens, He sees the tragedy of the sin for what it is in itself, and He is angered and grieved: “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD” (Ezekiel 18:32).

But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through His wide-angle lens, He sees the tragedy of the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out from it. He sees it in relation to all the connections and effects that form a pattern, or mosaic, stretching into eternity. This mosaic in all its parts—good and evil—brings Him delight.⁵

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5. Edwards treats this problem by distinguishing two kinds of willing in God (which is implied in what I have said). God’s “will of command” (or revealed will) is what He commands in Scripture (Thou shalt not kill, etc.). His “will of decree” (or secret will, or sovereign will) is what He infallibly brings to pass in the world. Edwards’s words are complex, but they are worth the effort if you love the deep things of God:

When a distinction is made between God’s revealed will and his secret will, or his will of command and decree, “will” is certainly in that distinction taken in two senses. His will of decree, is not his will in the same sense as his will of command is. Therefore, it is no difficulty at all to suppose, that the one may be otherwise than the other: his will in both senses is his inclination. But when we say he wills virtue, or loves virtue, or the happiness of his creature; thereby is intended, that virtue, or the creature’s happiness, absolutely and simply considered, is agreeable to the inclination of his nature.

His will of decree is his inclination to a thing, not as to that thing absolutely and simply, but with respect to the universality of things, that have been, are, or shall be. So God, though he hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though he hates sin in itself, yet he may will to permit it, for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things, and at all times. So, though he has no inclination to a creature’s misery, considered absolutely, yet he may will it, for the greater promotion of happiness in this universality.

Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the Divine Decrees,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 527–8.

“IT WAS THE WILL OF THE LORD TO CRUSH HIM”

For example, the death of Christ was the will and work of God the Father. Isaiah writes, “We esteemed him stricken, smitten by God... It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief” (53:4, 10). Yet surely, as God the Father saw the agony of His beloved Son and the wickedness that brought Him to the cross, He did not delight in those things in themselves (viewed through the narrow lens). Sin in itself, and the suffering of the innocent, is abhorrent to God.

Nevertheless, according to Hebrews 2:10, God the Father thought it was fitting to perfect the Pioneer of our salvation through suffering. God willed what He abhorred. He abhorred it in the narrow-lens view, but not in the wide-angle view of eternity. When the universality of things was considered, the death of the Son of God was seen by the Father as a magnificent way to demonstrate His righteousness (Romans 3:25–26) and bring His people to glory (Hebrews 2:10) and keep the angels praising Him forever and ever (Revelation 5:9–13).

Therefore, when I say that the sovereignty of God is the foundation of His happiness, I do not ignore or minimize the anger and grief God can express against evil. But neither do I infer from this wrath and sorrow that God is a frustrated God who cannot keep His creation under control. He has designed from all eternity, and is infallibly forming with every event, a magnificent mosaic of redemptive history.⁶ The contemplation of this mosaic (with both its dark and bright tiles) fills His heart with joy.

And if our Father’s heart is full of deep and unshakable happiness, we may be sure that when we seek our happiness in Him, we will not find Him “out of sorts” when we come. We will not find a frustrated, gloomy, irritable Father who wants to be left alone, but a Father whose heart is so full of joy that it spills over onto all those (Christian Hedonists) who are thirsty.

6. The term *redemptive history* simply refers to the history of God’s acts recorded in the Bible. It is called redemptive history not because it isn’t real history, but because it is history viewed from the perspective of God’s redeeming purpose.

GOD'S HAPPINESS IS IN HIMSELF

I began this chapter by saying that the ultimate ground of Christian Hedonism is the fact that God is uppermost in His own affections:

*The chief end of God is to glorify God
and enjoy Himself forever.*

What we have seen so far is that God is absolutely sovereign over the world, that He can therefore do anything He pleases, and that He is therefore not a frustrated God, but a deeply happy God, rejoicing in all His works (Psalm 104:31) when He considers them in relation to redemptive history.

What we have not yet seen is how this unshakable happiness of God is indeed a happiness in *Himself*. We have seen that God has the sovereign power to do whatever He pleases, but we have not yet seen specifically what it is that pleases Him. Why is it that contemplating the mosaic of redemptive history delights the heart of God? Is this not idolatry—for God to delight in something other than Himself?

So now we must ask: What does make God happy? What is it about redemptive history that delights the heart of God? The way to answer this question is to survey what God pursues in all His works. If we could discover what one thing God pursues in everything He does, we would know what He delights in most. We would know what is uppermost in His affections.

GOD DELIGHTS IN HIS GLORY

In appendix 1, I present a brief survey of the high points of redemptive history in order to discover God's ultimate goal in all He does. Jonathan Edwards has written the best book on the subject, *The End for Which God Created the World*.⁷ If what follows seems out of sync with Scripture, I urge you to examine the supporting evidence in appendix 1 or in Edwards's book.

My conclusion is that God's own glory is uppermost in His own affections.

7. Reprinted in its entirety in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998).

In everything He does, His purpose is to preserve and display that glory. To say that His own glory is uppermost in His own affections means that He puts a greater value on it than on anything else. He delights in His glory above all things.

Glory is not easy to define. It is like beauty. How would you define beauty? Some things we have to point at rather than define. But let me try. God's glory is the beauty of His manifold perfections. It can refer to the bright and awesome radiance that sometimes breaks forth in visible manifestations. Or it can refer to the infinite moral excellence of His character. In either case it signifies a reality of infinite greatness and worth. C. S. Lewis helps us with his own effort to point at it:

Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word glory a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see how the "fear" of God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags.⁸

God's ultimate goal therefore is to preserve and display His infinite and awesome greatness and worth, that is, His glory.

God has many other goals in what He does. But none of them is more ultimate than this. They are all subordinate. God's overwhelming passion is to exalt the value of His glory. To that end, He seeks to display it, to oppose those who belittle it, and to vindicate it from all contempt. It is clearly the uppermost reality in His affections. He loves His glory infinitely.

This is the same as saying: He loves himself infinitely. Or: He Himself is uppermost in His own affections. A moment's reflection reveals the inexorable justice of this fact. God would be unrighteous (just as we would) if He valued anything more than what is supremely valuable. But He Himself is supremely

8. Quoted from *The Four Loves*, in *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Clyde Kilby (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 202.

valuable. If He did not take infinite delight in the worth of His own glory, He would be unrighteous. For it is right to take delight in a person in proportion to the excellence of that person's glory.

GOD DELIGHTS IN THE GLORY OF HIS SON

Another moment's reflection reminds us that this is exactly what we affirm when we affirm the eternal divinity of God's Son. We stand at the foothills of mystery in all these things. But the Scriptures have given us some glimpses of the heights. They teach us that the Son of God is Himself God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

Therefore, when the Father beheld the Son from all eternity, He was beholding the exact representation of Himself. As Hebrews 1:3 (RSV) says, the Son "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." And 2 Corinthians 4:4 (RSV) speaks of "the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God."

From these texts we learn that through all eternity God the Father has beheld the image of His own glory perfectly represented in the person of His Son. Therefore, one of the best ways to think about God's infinite enjoyment of His own glory is to think of it as the delight He has in His Son, who is the perfect reflection of that glory (John 17:24–26).

When Christ entered the world and proceeded to fulfill all righteousness, God the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). As God the Father contemplates the image of His own glory in the person of His Son, He is infinitely happy. "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (Isaiah 42:1).

Within the triune Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), God has been uppermost in His own affections for all eternity. This belongs to His very nature, for He has begotten and loved the Son from all eternity. Therefore, God has been supremely and eternally happy in the fellowship of the Trinity.⁹

GOD DELIGHTS IN THE GLORY OF HIS WORK

In creation, God “went public”¹⁰ with the glory that reverberates joyfully between the Father and the Son. There is something about the fullness of God’s joy that inclines it to overflow. There is an expansive quality to His joy. It wants to share itself. The impulse to create the world was not from weakness, as though God were lacking in some perfection that creation could supply. “It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow.”¹¹

God loves to behold His glory reflected in His works. So the eternal happiness of the triune God spilled over in the work of creation and redemption. And since this original happiness was God’s delight in His own glory, therefore the happiness that He has in all His works of creation and redemption is nothing other than a delight in His own glory. This is why God has done all things, from creation to consummation, for the preservation and display of His glory. All His works are simply the spillover of His infinite exuberance for His own excellence.

IS GOD FOR US OR FOR HIMSELF?

But now the question arises: If God is so utterly enamored of His own glory, how can He be a God of love? If He unwaveringly does all things for His

9. If one should ask what place the Holy Spirit has in this understanding of the Trinity, I would direct attention to two works of Jonathan Edwards: “Treatise on Grace” and “An Essay on the Trinity.” He sums up his understanding of the Trinity in these words:

And this I suppose to be that blessed Trinity that we read of in the Holy Scriptures. The Father is the deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner, or the deity in its direct existence. The Son is the deity generated by God’s understanding, or having an idea of Himself and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Ghost is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in God’s infinite love to and delight in Himself. And I believe the whole Divine essence does truly and distinctly subsist both in the Divine idea and Divine love, and that each of them are properly distinct persons.

Jonathan Edwards, “An Essay on the Trinity,” in *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971), 118.

In other words, the Holy Spirit is the delight that the Father and the Son have in each other, and He carries in Himself so fully all the essence of the Father and the Son that He Himself stands forth as a third Person in His own right.

Jonathan Edwards, “Treatise on Grace,” in *Treatise on Grace*, 63.

10. I borrow this phrase from Daniel Fuller’s book *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992). See especially chapters 8 and 9.
11. Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 102. This “Dissertation” is of immense value in handling the whole question of God’s goal in history. For the complete text, as well as footnotes to aid your study, see Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*.

own sake, how then can we have any hope that He will do anything for our sake? Does not the apostle say, “[Love] does not seek its own” (1 Corinthians 13:5, NASB)?

Now we begin to see how the issue of God’s happiness can make or break the philosophy of Christian Hedonism. If God were so self-centered that He had no inclination to love His creatures, then Christian Hedonism would be dead. Christian Hedonism depends on the open arms of God. It depends on the readiness of God to accept and save and satisfy the heart of all who seek their joy in Him. But if God is on an ego trip and out of reach, then it is in vain that we pursue our happiness in Him.

Is God for us or for Himself? It is precisely in answering this question that we will discover the great foundation for Christian Hedonism.

IS HE VAIN OR LOVING TO COMMAND OUR PRAISE?

The Bible is replete with commands to praise God. God commands it because this is the ultimate goal of all He does—“to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:10). Three times in Ephesians 1 this great aim is proclaimed: “In love He predestined us to adoption as sons...to the praise of the glory of His grace” (vv. 4–6, NASB); we have been predestined and appointed to “be to the praise of His glory” (v. 12, NASB); the Holy Spirit “is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (v. 14).

All the different ways God has chosen to display His glory in creation and redemption seem to reach their culmination in the praises of His redeemed people. God governs the world with glory precisely that He might be admired, marveled at, exalted, and praised. The climax of His happiness is the delight He takes in the echoes of His excellence in the praises of the saints.

But again and again I have found that people stumble over this truth. People do not like to hear that God is uppermost in His own affections, or that He does all things for His own glory, or that He exalts Himself and seeks the praise of men.

Why? There are at least two reasons. One is that we just don’t like people

who are like that. The other is that the Bible teaches us not to be like that. Let's examine these objections and see if they can apply to God.

IS GOD A SECOND-HANDER?

First, we just don't like people who seem to be enamored with their own intelligence or strength or skill or good looks or wealth. We don't like scholars who try to show off their specialized knowledge or recite for us all their recent publications. We don't like businessmen who talk about how shrewdly they have invested their money and how they stayed right on top of the market to get in low and out high. We don't like children to play one-upmanship (Mine's bigger! Mine's faster! Mine's prettier!). And unless we are one of them, we disapprove of men and women who dress not functionally and simply, but to attract attention with the latest style.

Why don't we like all that? I think at root it's because such people are inauthentic. They are what Ayn Rand calls "second-handers." They don't live from the joy that comes through achieving what they value for its own sake. Instead, they live secondhand from the compliments of others. They have one eye on their action and one on their audience. We simply do not admire second-handers. We admire people who are secure and composed enough that they don't need to shore up their weaknesses and compensate for their deficiencies by trying to get compliments.

It stands to reason, then, that any teaching that puts God in the category of a second-hander will be unacceptable to Christians. And for many, the teaching that God seeks to show off His glory and get the praise of men does in fact put Him in the category of a second-hander. But should it?

One thing is certain: God is not weak and has no deficiencies: "From him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:36). He is not "served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Everything that exists owes its existence to Him, and no one can add anything to Him that is not already flowing from Him. Therefore, God's zeal to seek His own glory and to be praised by men cannot be owing to His need to shore up some weakness or compensate for

some deficiency. He may look, at first glance, like one of the second-handers, but He is not like them, and the superficial similarity must be explained another way.

“LOVE SEEKS NOT ITS OWN”—EXCEPT
IN THE JOY OF OTHERS

The second reason people stumble over the teaching that God exalts His own glory and seeks to be praised by His people is that the Bible teaches us not to be like that. For example, the Bible says that love “does not seek its own” (1 Corinthians 13:5, NASB). How can God be loving and yet be utterly devoted to “seeking His own” glory and praise and joy? How can God be for us if He is so utterly for Himself?

The answer I propose is this: Because God is unique as an all-glorious, totally self-sufficient Being, He must be for Himself if He is to be for us. The rules of humility that belong to a creature cannot apply in the same way to its Creator. If God should turn away from Himself as the Source of infinite joy, He would cease to be God. He would deny the infinite worth of His own glory. He would imply that there is something more valuable outside Himself. He would commit idolatry.

This would be no gain for us. For where can we go when our God has become unrighteous? Where will we find a Rock of integrity in the universe when the heart of God has ceased to value supremely the supremely valuable? Where shall we turn with our adoration when God Himself has forsaken the claims of infinite worth and beauty?

No, we do not turn God’s self-exaltation into love by demanding that God cease to be God. Instead, we must come to see that God is love precisely because He relentlessly pursues the praises of His name in the hearts of His people.

DELIGHT IS INCOMPLETE UNTIL IT IS EXPRESSED

Consider this question: In view of God’s infinite power and wisdom and beauty, what would His love for a human being involve? Or to put it another way: What could God give us to enjoy that would prove Him most loving? There is

only one possible answer: *Himself!* If He withholds Himself from our contemplation and companionship, no matter what else He gives us, He is not loving.

Now we are on the brink of what for me was a life-changing discovery. What do we all do when we are given or shown something beautiful or excellent? We *praise* it! We praise new little babies: “Oh, look at that nice round head! And all that hair! And her hands! Aren’t they perfect?” We praise a lover after a long absence: “Your eyes are like a cloudless sky! Your hair like forest silk!” We praise a grand slam in the bottom of the ninth when we are down by three. We praise the October trees along the banks of the St. Croix.

But the great discovery for me, as I said, came while I was reading “A Word about Praise” in C. S. Lewis’s *Reflections on the Psalms*. His recorded thoughts—born from wrestling with the idea that God not only wants our praise, but commands it—bear looking at again, in fuller form:

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or any thing—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least....

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole,

more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.¹²

There is the solution! We praise what we enjoy because the delight is incomplete until it is expressed in praise. If we were not allowed to speak of what we value and celebrate what we love and praise what we admire, our joy would not be full. So if God loves us enough to make our joy full, He must not only give us Himself; He must also win from us the praise of our hearts—not because He needs to shore up some weakness in Himself or compensate for some deficiency, but because He loves us and seeks the fullness of our joy that can be found only in knowing and praising Him, the most magnificent of all Beings. If He is truly for us, He must be for Himself!

God is the one Being in all the universe for whom seeking His own praise is the ultimately loving act. For Him, self-exaltation is the highest virtue. When He does all things “for the praise of His glory,” He preserves for us and offers to us the only thing in all the world that can satisfy our longings. God is for us! And the foundation of this love is that God has been, is now, and always will be for Himself.

SUMMARY

God is absolutely sovereign. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Psalm 115:3). Therefore He is not frustrated. He rejoices in all His works when He contemplates them as colors of the magnificent mosaic of

12. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 93–5.

redemptive history. He is an unshakably happy God.

His happiness is the delight He has in Himself. Before creation, He rejoiced in the image of His glory in the person of His Son. Then the joy of God “went public” in the works of creation and redemption. These works delight the heart of God because they reflect His glory. He does everything He does to preserve and display that glory, for in this His soul rejoices.

All the works of God culminate in the praises of His redeemed people. The climax of His happiness is the delight He takes in the echoes of His excellence in the praises of the saints. This praise is the consummation of our own joy in God. Therefore, God’s pursuit of praise from us and our pursuit of pleasure in Him are the same pursuit. This is the great gospel! This is the foundation of Christian Hedonism.

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’
will enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

MATTHEW 7:21

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field,
which a man found and covered up.
Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has
and buys that field.”*

MATTHEW 13:44

*If I were to ask you why you have believed in Christ,
why you have become Christians, every man will answer truly,
“For the sake of happiness.”*

SAINT AUGUSTINE

CONVERSION

The Creation of a Christian Hedonist

“THE GATE IS NARROW”

If everyone were bound to enter the kingdom of heaven, we might not have to speak of conversion. But not everyone is bound to enter: “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:14).

Chapter 1 ended with the discovery that God’s pursuit of praise from us and our pursuit of pleasure in Him are one and the same pursuit. God’s quest to be glorified and our quest to be satisfied reach their goal in this one experience: our delight in God, which overflows in praise. For God, praise is the sweet echo of His own excellence in the hearts of His people. For us, praise is the summit of satisfaction that comes from living in fellowship with God.

The stunning implication of this discovery is that all the omnipotent energy that drives the heart of God to pursue His own glory also drives Him to satisfy the hearts of those who seek their joy in Him. The good news of the Bible is that God is not at all disinclined to satisfy the hearts of those who hope in Him. Just the opposite: The very thing that can make us happiest is what God delights in with all His heart and with all His soul:

“I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them.... I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and all my soul.” (Jeremiah 32:40–41)

With all His heart and with all His soul, God joins us in the pursuit of our everlasting joy because the consummation of that joy in Him redounds to the glory of His own infinite worth. All who cast themselves on God find that they are carried into endless joy by God's omnipotent commitment to His own glory:

“For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.” (Isaiah 48:11)

Yes, Omnipotent Joy pursues the good of all who cast themselves on God! “The LORD takes pleasure in those who...hope in his steadfast love (Psalm 147:11). But this is not everyone.

“For *those who love God* all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28)—but not for everyone. There are sheep and there are goats (Matthew 25:32). There are wise and there are foolish (Matthew 25:2). There are those who are being saved and those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1:18). And the difference is that one group has been converted and the other hasn't.

The aim of this chapter is to show the necessity of conversion and to argue that it is nothing less than the creation of a Christian Hedonist. I don't mean you have to use this phrase, or even like this phrase. I mean that no one is a Christian who does not embrace Jesus gladly as his most valued treasure, and then pursue the fullness of that joy in Christ that honors Him.

WHY NOT JUST SAY, “BELIEVE”?

Someone may ask, “If your aim is conversion, why don't you just use the straightforward, biblical command ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31)? Why bring in this new terminology of Christian Hedonism?”

My answer has two parts. First, we are surrounded by unconverted people who think they *do* believe in Jesus. Drunks on the street say they believe. Unmarried couples sleeping together say they believe. Elderly people who haven't sought worship or fellowship for forty years say they believe. All kinds of lukewarm, world-loving church attenders say they believe. The world

abounds with millions of unconverted people who say they believe in Jesus.

It does no good to tell these people to believe in the Lord Jesus. The phrase is empty. My responsibility as a preacher of the gospel and a teacher in the church is not to preserve and repeat cherished biblical sentences, but to pierce the heart with biblical truth. In my neighborhood, every drunk on the street “believes” in Jesus. Drug dealers “believe” in Jesus. Panhandlers who haven’t been to church in forty years “believe” in Jesus. So I use different words to unpack what *believe* means. In recent years I have asked, “Do you receive Jesus as your *Treasure*?” Not just *Savior* (everybody wants out of hell, but not to be with Jesus). Not just *Lord* (they might submit begrudgingly). The key is: Do you treasure Him more than everything? Converts to Christian Hedonism say with Paul, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

This leads to the second part of my answer. There are other straightforward biblical commands besides “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” The reason for introducing the idea of Christian Hedonism is to force these commands to our attention.

Could it be that today the most straightforward biblical command for conversion is not, “Believe in the Lord,” but, “Delight yourself in the LORD”? And might not many slumbering hearts be stabbed broad awake by the words “Unless a man be born again *into a Christian Hedonist* he cannot see the kingdom of God”?

SIX CRUCIAL TRUTHS TO SUMMARIZE OUR NEED AND GOD’S PROVISION¹

Why is conversion so crucial? What is there about God and man that makes it necessary? And what has God done to meet our desperate need? And what must we do to enjoy the benefits of His provision? These are huge questions. I attempt a summary answer with the following six truths from Scripture.

1. If this summary of the gospel would be helpful in your own relationships with others, it is available in an attractive tract format entitled “Quest for Joy” from Desiring God Ministries, 2601 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55406; phone: 1-888-346-4700; fax: 612-338-4372; e-mail: mail@desiringGOD.org.

HOW HAVE WE FAILED?

1. God created us for His glory.

“Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.” (Isaiah 43:6–7)

The proper understanding of everything in life begins with God. No one will ever understand the necessity of conversion who does not know why God created us. He created us “in His image” so that we would image forth His glory in the world. We were made to be prisms refracting the light of God’s glory into all of life. Why God should want to give us a share in shining with His glory is a great mystery. Call it grace or mercy or love—it is an unspeakable wonder. Once we were not. Then we existed—for the glory of God!

2. Therefore, it is the duty of every person to live for the glory of God.

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

If God made us for His glory, it is clear that we should live for His glory. Our duty comes from God’s design.

What does it mean to glorify God?

It does not mean to make Him more glorious. It means to acknowledge His glory, to value it above all things, and to make it known. It implies heartfelt gratitude: “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me” (Psalm 50:23). It also implies trust: Abraham “grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God” (Romans 4:20).

Glorifying God is the duty not only of those who have heard the preaching of the gospel, but also of peoples who have only the witness of nature and their own conscience:

His 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. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. (Romans 1:20–21)

God will not judge anyone for failing to perform a duty if the person had no access to the knowledge of that duty. But even without the Bible, all people have access to the knowledge that we are created by God and therefore are dependent on Him for everything, thus owing Him the gratitude and trust of our hearts. Deep within us we all know that it is our duty to glorify our Maker by thanking Him for all we have, trusting Him for all we need, and obeying all His revealed will.

HOW DESPERATE IS OUR CONDITION?

3. Yet all of us have failed to glorify God as we ought.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

What does it mean to “fall short” of the glory of God? It does not mean that we are supposed to be as glorious as God is and that we have fallen short. We ought to fall short in that sense! The best explanation of Romans 3:23 is Romans 1:23. It says that those who did not glorify or thank God became fools “and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images.” This is the way we “fall short” of the glory of God: We exchange it for something of lesser value. All sin comes from not putting supreme value on the glory of God—this is the very essence of sin.

And we have all sinned. “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). None of us has trusted God the way we should. None of us has felt the depth and consistency of gratitude we owe Him. None of us has obeyed Him according to His wisdom and right. We have exchanged and dishonored His glory again and again. We have trusted ourselves. We have taken credit for His gifts. We have turned away from the path of His commandments because we thought we knew better.

In all this we have held the glory of the Lord in contempt. The exceeding evil of sin is not the harm it does to us or to others (though that is great!). The wickedness of sin is owing to the implicit disdain for God. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and even had her husband killed, what did God say to him through the prophet Nathan? He did not remind the king that marriage is inviolable or that human life is sacred. He said, “You have despised *me*” (2 Samuel 12:10).

But this is not the whole account of our condition. We not only choose to sin; we *are* sinful. The Bible describes our heart as blind (2 Corinthians 4:4) and hard (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26) and dead (Ephesians 2:1, 5) and unable to submit to the law of God (Romans 8:7–8). By nature we are “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3).

4. Therefore, all of us are subject to eternal condemnation by God.

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thessalonians 1:9)

Having held the glory of God in contempt through ingratitude and distrust and disobedience, we are sentenced to be excluded from the enjoyment of that glory forever and ever in the eternal misery of hell.

The word *hell* (*gehenna*) occurs in the New Testament twelve times—eleven on the lips of Jesus. It is not a myth created by dismal and angry preachers. It is the solemn warning of the Son of God who died to deliver sinners from its curse. We ignore it at great risk.

Hell is a place of torment. It is not merely the absence of pleasure. It is not annihilation.² Jesus repeatedly describes it as an experience of fire. “Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22). “It is better for

2. For the biblical support against annihilationism and in support of hell as eternal conscious torment, see John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed., revised and expanded (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), chapter 4, and the bibliography cited therein.

you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire” (Matthew 18:9). “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:47–48). He warned often that there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

Not only is it a place of torment; it is also everlasting. Hell is not remedial, contrary to what many popular writers are saying these days.³ Jesus closes the Parable of the Last Judgment with these words: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ . . . These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41, 46). The “punishment” is eternal the same way the “life” is eternal.

Another evidence that hell is everlasting is the teaching of Jesus that there is sin that will not be forgiven in the age to come: “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). If hell is remedial and will someday be emptied of all sinners, then they would have to be forgiven. But Jesus says there is sin that will never be forgiven.

John sums up the terrible realities of torment and endlessness in Revelation 14:11: “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.”

Therefore, hell is just. Some have objected that an everlasting punishment is out of proportion to the seriousness of the sin committed. But this is not true,

3. Among evangelicals, the reputation of George MacDonald’s works has promoted this notion of hell as remedial and not eternal. For example, MacDonald’s sermon “Justice,” in *Creation in Christ*, ed. Rolland Hein (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw, 1976), 63–81, argues vehemently against the orthodox view of hell:

Mind I am not saying it is not right to punish [wicked people]; I am saying that justice is not, never can be, satisfied by suffering—nay, cannot have any satisfaction in or from suffering. . . . Such justice as Dante’s keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform, or at least give a home to, victorious evil. Is He not defeated every time that one of these lost souls defies Him? God is triumphantly defeated, I say, throughout the hell of his vengeance. Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a tyrant. . . . Punishment is for the sake of amendment and atonement. God is bound by His love to punish sin in order to deliver His creature: He is bound by his justice to destroy sin in His creation. (71–2)

J. I. Packer discusses the contemporary forms of this view in “Good Pagans and God’s Kingdom,” *Christianity Today* 17 (17 January 1986), 22–5 and in “The Problem of Eternal Punishment,” in *The J. I. Packer Collection*, selected and introduced by Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 210–26.

because the seriousness of our sin is infinite. Consider the explanation of Jonathan Edwards:

The crime of one being despising and casting contempt on another, is proportionably more or less heinous, as he was under greater or less obligations to obey him. And therefore if there be any being that we are under infinite obligations to love, and honor, and obey, the contrary towards him must be infinitely faulty.

Our obligation to love, honor, and obey any being is in proportion to his loveliness, honorableness, and authority.... But God is a being infinitely lovely, because he hath infinite excellency and beauty....

So sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment.... The eternity of the punishment of ungodly men renders it infinite...and therefore renders no more than proportionable to the heinousness of what they are guilty of.⁴

When every human being stands before God on the Day of judgment, God would not have to use one sentence of Scripture to show us our guilt and the appropriateness of our condemnation. He would need only to ask three questions: (1) Was it not plain in nature that everything you had was a gift and that you were dependent on your Maker for life and breath and everything? (2) Did not the judicial sentiment⁵ in your own heart always hold other people guilty when they lacked

4. Jonathan Edwards, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 669.

5. I want to express gratitude and deep admiration for Edward John Carnell's penetrating analysis of "the judicial sentiment" and its relation to the existence of God. The judicial sentiment is the moral faculty that is duly offended when we are mistreated. Here is a taste of his words from the profound and beautiful book *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957):

Whereas conscience accuses the self the judicial sentiment accuses others. The direction of accusation is the important thing. Conscience monitors one's own moral conduct, while the judicial sentiment monitors the moral conduct of others.

Furthermore, conscience is subject to social and cultural conditioning, whereas the judicial sentiment is not. All normal men, past, present, and future, experience an aroused judicial sentiment whenever they are personally mistreated. (110)

An aroused judicial sentiment is merely heaven's warning that the image of God is being outraged. Cultural conditioning may alter the direction of the judicial sentiment, but is does not alter the faculty itself. (112)

The voice of the judicial sentiment is the voice of God. (136)

the gratitude they should have had in response to a kindness you performed? (3) Has your life been filled with gratitude and trust toward Me in proportion to My generosity and authority? Case closed.

WHAT HAS GOD DONE TO SAVE US FROM HIS WRATH?

5. Nevertheless, in His great mercy, God sent forth His Son, Jesus Christ, to save sinners by dying in their place on the cross and rising bodily from the dead.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15)
[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Romans 4:25)

Over against the terrifying news that we have fallen under the condemnation of our Creator and that He is bound by His own righteous character to preserve the worth of His glory by pouring out eternal wrath on our sin, there is the wonderful news of the gospel. This is a truth no one can ever learn from nature. It has to be told to neighbors and preached in churches and carried by missionaries.

The good news is that God Himself has decreed a way to satisfy the demands of His justice without condemning the whole human race. Hell is one way to settle accounts with sinners and uphold His justice. But there is another way. The wisdom of God has ordained a way for the love of God to deliver us from the wrath of God without compromising the justice of God.

And what is this wisdom?

The death of the Son of God for sinners! “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24).

The death of Christ is the wisdom of God by which the love of God saves sinners from the wrath of God, all the while upholding and demonstrating the

righteousness of God in Christ. Romans 3:25–26 may be the most important verses in the Bible:

God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation⁶ by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Not either/or! Both! God is wholly just! *And* He justifies the ungodly! He acquits the guilty, but is not guilty in doing so. This is the greatest news in the world!⁷

[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh. (Romans 8:3)

[Christ] bore our sins in his body on the tree. (1 Peter 2:24)

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:5)

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6. *Propitiation* is a rare word today. It has been replaced in many translations with more common words (*expiation, sacrifice of atonement*). I keep it in order to stress the original meaning, namely, that what Christ did by dying on the cross for sinners was to appease the wrath of God against sinners. By requiring of His Son such humiliation and suffering for the sake of God's glory, He openly demonstrated that He does not sweep sin under the rug. All contempt for His glory is duly punished, either on the cross, where the wrath of God is propitiated for those who believe, or in hell, where the wrath of God is poured out on those who don't.
 7. This truth of the justification of the ungodly by faith alone is worthy of a book all on its own. I was so gripped by the glory of it and so disturbed by the assault on it that I wrote *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002). If you want to understand the doctrine of justification as the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us, or see a modern defense of it, I commend this book to you.

If the most terrifying news in the world is that we have fallen under the condemnation of our Creator and that He is bound by His own righteous character to preserve the worth of His glory by pouring out His wrath on our sin, then the best news in all the world (the gospel!) is that God has decreed a way of salvation that also upholds the worth of His glory, the honor of His Son, and the eternal salvation of His elect. He has given His Son to die for sinners and to conquer their death by His own resurrection.

WHAT MUST WE DO TO BE SAVED?

6. The benefits purchased by the death of Christ belong to those who repent and trust in Him.

“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.” (Acts 3:19)

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31)

Not everybody is saved from God’s wrath just because Christ died for sinners. There is a condition we must meet in order to be saved.⁸ I want to try to show that the condition, summed up here as repentance and faith, is conversion and that conversion is nothing less than the creation of a Christian Hedonist.

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

*Conversion*⁹ is used in the Bible only once, in Acts 15:3. Paul and Barnabas “passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.” This conversion involved repentance and faith, as the other reports in Acts show.

8. In using the word *condition* for what we must do, I do not in any way want to minimize the truth that Jesus fulfilled the divine demand for our righteousness as the ground of our justification. What is required of us is not that we in any way improve on Christ’s righteousness as the ground of our right standing with God. Rather, what is required of us is a “condition” in a different sense: We must receive as a treasure what Christ has done for us and all the promises and joyful fellowship with God that He purchased.

9. The verb form of *conversion* (convert) is used in the Authorized Version of the New Testament in Matthew 13:15 (= Mark 4:12 = John 12:40 = Acts 28:27); 18:3; Luke 22:32; Acts 3:19; and James 5:19–20.

For example, in Acts 11:18 the apostles respond to Peter’s testimony about Gentile conversions like this: “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted *repentance* that leads to life.” And in Acts 14:27, Paul and Barnabas report the conversion of the Gentiles by saying that “God...had opened a door of *faith* to the Gentiles.”

Conversion, then, is repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation).¹⁰ They are really two sides of the same coin. One side is tails—turn tail on the fruits of unbelief. The other side is heads—head straight for Jesus and trust His promises. You can’t have the one without the other any more than you can face two ways at once or serve two masters.

This means that saving faith in Christ always involves a profound change of heart. It is not merely agreement with the truth of a doctrine. *Satan* agrees with true doctrine (James 2:19). Saving faith is far deeper and more pervasive than that.

CONVERSION IS A GIFT OF GOD

We get an inkling of something awesome behind repentance and faith when we see hints in the book of Acts that conversion is the gift of God. “God has granted repentance that leads to life” (11:18). “God exalted [Christ] at his right hand...to give repentance to Israel” (5:31). God “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27). “The Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (16:14).

We will never fully appreciate what a deep and awesome thing conversion is until we own up to the fact that it is a miracle. It is a gift of God. Recall again the point that we not only sin, but we also *are* sinful—blind, hard, dead, unable to submit to the law of God. And so when we hear the gospel, we will never respond positively unless God performs the miracle of regeneration.¹¹

10. For further elaboration, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 709–21.

11. *Regeneration* is a big word for the new birth. It occurs in Greek (*palingenesia*) only once in the New Testament in reference to the new birth of a person (Titus 3:5) (also once in reference to the rebirth of the creation in the age to come, Matthew 19:28). For more on regeneration, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 699–708.

FAITH IS OUR ACT, BUT IS POSSIBLE
BECAUSE OF GOD'S ACT

Repentance and faith are our work. But we will not repent and believe unless God does His work to overcome our hard and rebellious hearts. This divine work is called *regeneration*. Our work is called *conversion*.¹²

Conversion does indeed include an act of will by which we renounce sin and submit ourselves to the authority of Christ and put our hope and trust in Him. We are responsible to do this and will be condemned if we don't. But just as clearly, the Bible teaches that, owing to our hard heart and willful blindness and spiritual insensitivity, we cannot do this.¹³

We must first experience the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures promised long ago that God would devote Himself to this work in order to create for Himself a faithful people:

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6)

“I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.” (Jeremiah 24:7)

12. “In conversion man is active, and it wholly consists in his act; but in regeneration the Spirit of God is the only active cause.” Samuel Hopkins, “Regeneration and Conversion,” in *Introduction to Puritan Theology*, ed. Edward Hindson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1976), 180. I recommend this entire essay as an excellent statement on the relationship between regeneration (new birth) and conversion (repentance and faith).

13. This is a great stumbling block for many people—to assert that we are responsible to do what we are morally unable to do. The primary reason for asserting it is not that it springs obviously from our normal use of reason, but that the Bible so plainly teaches it. It may help, however, to consider that the inability we speak of is not owing to a physical handicap, but to moral corruption. Our inability to believe is not the result of a physically damaged brain, but of a morally perverted will. Physical inability would remove accountability. Moral inability does not. We cannot come to the light, because our corrupt and arrogant nature hates the light. So when someone does come to the light, “it is clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought by God” (John 3:21). The best treatment of this difficult subject I know of is Jonathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1998, original 1754); also found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1. For an excellent summary of Edwards’s argument, see C. Samuel Storms, “Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom of the Will,” *Trinity Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 131–69.

“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” (Ezekiel 11:19–20)

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

These great promises from the Old Testament describe a work of God that changes a heart of stone into a heart of flesh and causes people to “know” and “love” and “obey” God. Without this spiritual heart transplant, people will not know and love and obey God. This prior work of God is what we mean by regeneration.

WE ARE “CALLED” THE WAY JESUS CALLED LAZARUS: DEATH TO LIFE

In the New Testament, God is clearly active, creating a people for Himself by calling¹⁴ them out of darkness and enabling them to believe the gospel and walk in the light. John teaches most clearly that regeneration precedes and enables faith.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ *has been* born of God. (1 John 5:1)

14. The Bible requires that we speak of God’s “call” in at least two distinct senses. One call is the general or external call that goes out in the preaching of the gospel. Everyone who hears a gospel message or reads the Bible is called in this sense. But God calls in another sense to some who hear the gospel. This is God’s internal or effectual call. It changes a person’s heart so that faith is secured. It is like the call “Let there be light!” or “Lazarus, come forth!” It creates what it demands. The key passage that demands this distinction is 1 Corinthians 1:23–24: “We preach Christ crucified [general call], a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called [effectual call], both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Among the “generally called,” there is a group who are “called” in such a way that they are enabled to esteem the gospel as wisdom and power. The change caused by the effectual call is none other than the change of regeneration. For more on effectual calling, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 692–721.