

Preface

Revised for the 2025 Edition

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" (Ps. 37:4). And it is serious because, as Jeremy Taylor said, "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy."¹

The heroes of this book are Jesus, who endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Heb. 12:2); the apostle Paul, who was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10); Jonathan Edwards, who deeply savored the sweet sovereignty of God; C. S. Lewis, who knew that the Lord "finds our desires not too strong but too weak"²; and all the missionaries who have left everything for Jesus and in the end said, "I never made a sacrifice."

Almost forty years have passed since *Desiring God* first appeared in 1986. 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? Its context today is dramatically different from when it was first published.

Things have changed personally, culturally, and globally. Since its first edition, my body and mind have passed from being forty years old to

¹ Quoted in C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 19.

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

being almost eighty. My marriage advanced from a seventeen-year-old marriage to a fifty-seven-year-old marriage.

My pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church extended from six years to thirty-three years. And since laying down those responsibilities in 2013, I have been working full time for *Desiring God*, the ministry that took its name from this book. There were four young sons when I first wrote this book. Today, there are five mature adults, including a daughter, and they all have contributed to make me the grandfather of fifteen.

Culturally and globally, the world is a different place. Consider some of the events: the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Rwandan genocide, the global AIDS pandemic, Y2K, 9/11, the rise of jihadist terrorism, the ceaseless Middle East wars, deadly tsunamis, the historic Obama presidency, the rise of China as a world force, global warming, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Or consider the transformation of popular culture by developments that were not prominent—some inconceivable—before 1986: laptop computers, smartphones, debit cards, DVDs (which have come and gone), pay-at-the-pump gasoline, digital cameras (which have been replaced by phones in every pocket), Viagra, flat-screen TVs, the internet, streaming services, blogging, web commerce, Amazon, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, electric cars, artificial intelligence, the ongoing sexual revolution with so-called same-sex marriage and so-called transgenderism, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and the ongoing battle for the unborn. And who but God knows what revolutionary events and inventions will happen between my writing these lines and your reading them?

In other words, things have changed. This is the world I live in with profound appreciation and serious concern. But as personally astute and as culturally awake as I try to be, what seems plain to me is that the really important, deep, and lasting things in life have not

changed—and will never change. And, therefore, my commitment to the message of this book has not changed. The truth that I unfold here is my life. That *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him* continues to be a spectacular and precious truth in my mind and heart. It has sustained me through my eighth decade of life, and I do not doubt that, because of Jesus, it will carry me home.

In the 1995 revised edition, I added a chapter called “Suffering: The Sacrifice of Christian Hedonism.” The reason was 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 Tim. 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. If the message of this book 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 Cor. 6:10).

Autobiographically, the years since the first edition of *Desiring God* have been the hardest. One of the older women of our church quipped to us at our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, “The first twenty-five are the hardest.” We have not found it to be so. We are well past the end of the second twenty-five, and undoubtedly they were the hardest.

The body ages, and things go wrong. Marriage, we found, passes through deep water as husband and wife pass through midlife and beyond. Yes, we made it. But we will not diminish the disquietude of those years. We were not ashamed to seek help. God has been good to us—much kinder than we deserve. As we passed through our fourth decade of marriage, I thought I might be far enough along to write a seasoned book on marriage. It is called *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of*

Permanence.³ The paradox of that title is at the root of what we learned. Now, moving through our eighth decade of life and our sixth decade of marriage, the roots are deep, the covenant is solid, the love is sweet. Life is hard, and God is good.

During these four decades since *Desiring God* first appeared, I have been testing it and applying its vision in connection with more and more of life, 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.⁴ 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.*”⁵

3 John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Crossway, 2009).

4 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 in *The Pleasures of God* (Crossway, 2025); the gravity and gladness of preaching in *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Baker, 2004) and *Expository Exultation* (Crossway, 2018); the power and the price of world evangelization in *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 4th ed. (Baker, 2022); the daily battle against unbelief and sin in *Future Grace* (Multnomah, 2012); the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer in *A Hunger for God* (Crossway, 2013); a hundred practical issues in life and culture in *A Godward Life* (Multnomah, 1997), *Taste and See* (Multnomah, 2005), and *The Satisfied Soul* (Multnomah, 2017); the radical call to pastoral ministry in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (B&H, 2002); the goal of everyday life in *Don't Waste Your Life* (Crossway, 2003); the ultimate good of the gospel in *God Is the Gospel* (Crossway, 2005); the reality of the new birth in *Finally Alive* (Christian Focus, 2009); and the life of the mind in *Think* (Crossway, 2010) and *Foundations for Lifelong Learning* (Crossway, 2023); as well as the sovereignty of God in *Providence* (Crossway, 2021) and Christ's return in *Come, Lord Jesus* (Crossway, 2023).

5 Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (Baker, 1978), 17 (italics added). I have been asked so many times what this “work” looks like that I wrote another book to answer that question with as many specifics as I could. It is called *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Crossway, 2004) and is meant to be a fuller application of what I have written here.

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."⁶ But not only does the pursuit of joy in God give strength to endure; it is also 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."⁷

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 by faith to die with Christ to our old seductions—that is, to gain a distaste for them because of a superior satisfaction in all that God is for us in Christ. One of the reasons this book is still "working" after almost forty 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

6 J. I. Packer, "Richard Baxter on Heaven, Hope, and Holiness," in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 165.

7 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (1708; repr., Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 2:1096.

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.⁸

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 one 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 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 may have never been *Desiring God*.

I remain ever in debt to Daniel Fuller in all I do. It was his class in 1968 where 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. Until his death in 2023, he remained a treasured friend and teacher, and now he remains a precious memory.

The church that I served as pastor for thirty-three years is still my spiritual home where Noël and I worship. They call me pastor emeritus. Without the grace that the elders and people showed me for those decades together, I would have had no writing leave, and this book would not be what it is.

The successive editions of this work over the years have been made possible by the skills, insights, and labors of Justin Taylor followed by David Mathis. New and better editions would not have been possible

8 Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, abr. John T. Wilkinson (1650; repr., Epworth, 1962), 31.

without their help. The partnership that I have enjoyed with Crossway for over three decades continues with appreciation and joy. That they are publishing this new edition of *Desiring God* is a great gift to me.

Finally, a word about my father. He has gone to heaven since I dedicated the book to him. But the dedicatory words I wrote in 1986 are still true. When the first edition of *Desiring God* was published, I gave my father a copy with these words written on the dedicatory page:

When grace abounds, the yoke of the law is easy and the commandment is light. You have been to me grace upon grace these 41 years, and therefore I find nothing easier or lighter than to obey the holy statute: Honor thy father.

Respectfully with all my heart,
Johnny

I look back to my childhood and see mother laughing so hard at the dinner table that the tears ran down her face. She was a very happy woman. But especially when my father came home on a Monday. He had been gone two weeks in the work of evangelism. Or sometimes three or four. She would glow on Monday mornings when he was coming home.

At the dinner table on those nights (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 he 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 Daddy home!

John Piper

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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Introduction

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*.” “The chief *end* of man is to glorify God *and* enjoy Him forever.” 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 Cor. 10:31).

The overriding concern of this book is that in all of life God be glorified in 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.

Stunning Discoveries

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 presume that we are worshiping God if we find no God-exalting pleasure in him. (Don't miss those last two words: *in him*. Not first 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.

First, 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 or getting hungry is a law of the body when it lacks food.

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

Second, 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, 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

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (E. P. Dutton, 1958), 113 (no. 425).

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 deepest, longest happiness. Our mistake lies not in the intensity of our desire for happiness but in the weakness of it.

The third insight was there in Lewis's sermon, but Pascal made it more explicit:

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

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

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 gluttoned—on God! The growing conviction that praise should be motivated by the happiness we find in God seemed less and less strange.

The fourth 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 said that as he was beginning to believe in God, a great stumbling block was the presence of demands scattered throughout 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 went 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—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses,

³ Pascal, *Pensees*, 113.

colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . .

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 Christian 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 God. 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 . . . 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

4 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 94–95.

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

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 have ever made.

Fifth, I then turned to the Psalms for myself and found the language of Christian Hedonism everywhere. The quest for pleasure is not even optional but commanded:

Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps. 37:4)

Delight is a command, and 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. (Ps. 42:1–2)

5 Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," a–500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Yale University Press, 1994), 495 (entry no. 448; italics added). See also "Miscellanies" entry nos. 87 and 332 in Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," a–500*, 251–52 and 410, respectively, and see "Miscellanies" entry no. 679 in Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," 501–832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain, vol. 18 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Yale University Press, 2000), 237–39.

6 In chap. 10, I will deal 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.

My soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps. 63:1)

The experience 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.
(Ps. 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! (Ps. 34:8)

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! (119:103)

As C. S. Lewis said, God in the Psalms is the “all-satisfying Object.” His people adore him unashamedly for the “exceeding joy” they find in him (Ps. 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. (Ps. 16:11)

That is the short story of how I became a Christian Hedonist. I have now been brooding over these things since the fall of 1968, and there has emerged a philosophy—a view of reality—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 objections. 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 one 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 (Col. 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 does not argue that an act is right *because* it brings pleasure. There is a kind of hedonism that says that.⁷ That's not what I am saying. My aim is not to decide what is

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* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

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

I do not come to the Bible with a hedonistic theory that says we decide what is right by whether it gives pleasure. 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 instead to sell everything with joy (Matt. 13:44) in order to have the kingdom of heaven and thus “enter into the joy of your master” (25:21). In short, I am a Christian Hedonist not for any philosophical or theoretical reason but because God commands it. The label Christian Hedonism is mine. The reality is God’s!

Fifth, I do not say that the relationship between love and happiness is that “true happiness is the result of loving God and loving people.” That’s an oversimplification that misses the crucial and defining point. The distinguishing feature of Christian Hedonism is not that pleasure is the result of virtue but that virtue consists essentially, though not only, in pleasure. I know that will take some explaining and biblical support.

The reason I came to this conclusion is that I have to come to terms with biblical commands which don’t merely say that joy is the

8 Additional texts revealing the God-given duty of joy in God include Deut. 28:47; 1 Chron. 16:31, 33; Neh. 8:10; Pss. 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; Isa. 41:16; Joel 2:23; Zech. 2:10; 10:7; Phil. 3:1; 4:4. Additional texts mentioning the divine command of joy in loving others include 2 Cor. 9:7 (cf. Acts 20:35); Heb. 10:34; 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2.

byproduct of virtue but that it is part of virtue. For example, the Bible commands us

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

When you reflect 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 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,” as though God were indifferent to the state of your heart while your body went through the motion of good deeds. In the coming chapters, we will say much more about texts like these and how they actually work in daily life.

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

9 Mouw, *God Who Commands*, 36.

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 1 asks, "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* mayest live and die *happily*?" Thus, the entire catechism is an answer to the concern for how to live and die *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 a Christian Hedonist 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 the appendix, “Why Call It Christian Hedonism?” If this is a strange or troubling term, you may want to read those pages first before plunging into the main chapters.

I would prefer to reserve a definition of Christian Hedonism until the end of the book, when, I hope, 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—or view of reality—that aims to glorify God in the way he has commanded in the Bible. It is built on the following five convictions:

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience and, of itself, 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 merely *from* God but *in* God: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; / at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).
4. The happiness we find in God overflows and increases as it seeks to draw others into that joy through 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

*Sound doctrine [is] in accordance with
the gospel of the glory of the happy God.*

1 TIMOTHY 1:10–11 (AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION)

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 rather 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. (Ps. 115:3)

The implication of this text is that God has the right and power to do whatever makes him happy—whatever pleases him. 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. (Ps. 33:10–11)

And if none of his purposes can be frustrated, then he must be the happiest of all beings. This is what Paul meant when he wrote in 1 Timothy 1:10–11 that “sound doctrine [is] in accordance with the gospel of the glory of *the blessed [happy] God*.” This word “blessed” or “happy” is the same word used in the Beatitudes where Jesus said that because we are “blessed” (*makarios*) we should “rejoice and be glad” (Matt. 5:11–12). A blessed state is a happy state. A blessed God is a happy God. 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, pouting, and depression, like some Jack-and-the-beanstalk giant in the sky? What if God were frustrated, despondent, gloomy, dismal, 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. (Ps. 63:1)

I don't think so. We would all relate to God like little children who have a frustrated, gloomy, dismal, and 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 foundation. 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 gloomy and 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. (Ps. 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 not only for our good but 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:

¹ For a much fuller defense of God's sovereignty in all that he does, see John Piper, *Providence* (Crossway, 2020); *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Crossway,

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.” (Isa. 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 the newly awakened Nebuchadnezzar said:

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?” (Dan. 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. (Ps. 115:3)

2025), 51–84, 136–78; and *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Baker, 1993).

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

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. (Lam. 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” (2:7). Was Job wrong to attribute to God what came from Satan? No because the inspired writer tells us immediately after Job's words, “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (2:10).

The evil Satan causes is only by the permission of God. And when an all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful God permits something, he does so purposefully. What he permits is part of his plan. 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 said, “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 God’s plan nor stay his hand. It accomplished his purpose.

Or who would say that Herod’s contempt (Luke 23:11) or Pilate’s spineless expediency (23:24) or the Jews’ “Crucify, crucify him!” (23:21) or the Gentile soldiers’ mockery (23:36)—who would say that these were not sin? Yet Luke, in Acts 4:27–28, recorded 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 mysterious and 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. If we are going to understand the Bible,

2 For an explanation and defense of this statement, see John Piper, “Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be?,” *Desiring God*, July 1, 1998, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

we must embrace the counterintuitive truth that it is not sin in God to will that there be sin in the world.

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” (Rev. 17:13–14).

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” (Rev. 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. (Prov. 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. In all this, Joseph had done right. He had resisted sin. Where was God in all this sin against Joseph and in all his misery? Joseph answered in Genesis 50:20. He said 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.” He didn’t say that “God used it for good” but that “God meant it for good.” It was part of God’s plan.

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 sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.” Who is governing the coming and going of this hardness of heart so that it has a particular limit and gives way at the appointed time to the certain salvation of “all Israel”?

Or consider the disobedience in Romans 11:31. Paul spoke to his Gentile readers about Israel's disobedience in rejecting their Messiah: “So they too [Israel] 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 is God's purpose. For Israel certainly did not conceive of their own 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. (Ps. 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. (Prov. 16:33)

Not one sparrow “will fall to the ground without your Father’s will” (Matt. 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 heart 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 season 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

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 also have been published in individual volumes by Yale University Press.