A stone path made of rectangular pavers leads from the foreground towards a swimming pool in the background. The pool is surrounded by lush greenery, including trees and potted plants. The scene is captured in a soft, slightly overcast light. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the title and subtitle text.

# God-Centered Living

Christian Hedonism and  
the Life of Faith



INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



# § God-Centered Living: Christian Hedonism & The Life of Faith

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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**God-Centered Living:**  
*Christian Hedonism & The Life of Faith*

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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# Instructor's Introduction

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It is our hope and prayer that God would be pleased to use this curriculum for his glory. Thus, the intention of this curriculum is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ by equipping men, women, and young adults to serve as family, business and community leaders, full-time Christian workers, missionaries, pastors, and teachers. This curriculum is guided by the vision and values of Bethlehem College & Seminary, which are more fully explained at [bcsmn.edu](http://bcsmn.edu). On our website, you will find the God-centered philosophy that undergirds and motivates everything we do. May God be glorified in us as we are satisfied in him alone!

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

*The God-Centered Living* course is an introduction to Christian Hedonism, a philosophy of life that is built on the God of the Bible. The course unfolds two key assertions: 1) the God-centeredness of God informs every aspect of the Christian life; 2) the pursuit of God's glory and the pursuit of our joy is the same pursuit. Therefore, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." In this course students will examine key biblical passages and then thoughtfully interact with some of the central writings of John Piper: *Desiring God*, *God Is the Gospel*, and *Future Grace*. Biblical study, critical reflection, group discussion, and application are all important components of this course.

## 🌀 OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to accomplish specific objectives. A student successfully completing this course should be able to:

- ▷ magnify the worth of God in a more meaningful and personal way by treasuring him in their heart above all else. We recognize that this, the ultimate objective of the course, is impossible apart from the grace of God in the working of the Holy Spirit, who exalts the risen Lord, Jesus Christ
- ▷ understand the Scriptures more fully as a result of searching them diligently throughout the course. Every lesson will compel the student to read and meditate on the Word. Our desire is to encourage students to be Bereans (cf. Acts 17:11)
- ▷ comprehend and thoughtfully interact with some of the central writings of John Piper. To this end the student will answer comprehension questions for every section they are assigned to read
- ▷ discuss and apply the biblical truth that is presented in the curriculum.
- ▷ synthesize and summarize what they have learned through the course. This last objective will be accomplished by the completion of the course's final project

## 🌀 IMPLEMENTATION

As the instructor of this course, it is imperative that you are completely familiar with the curriculum. We therefore recommend that you read this entire section carefully and then skim through the rest of what is contained in this binder.

This course is designed to be taught in 12 lessons, ideally in 2 hours of in-class instruction and with approximately 2.5 hours homework each week. To achieve the kind of undistracted focus and academic rigor that maximizes learning, we recommend that this course be taught as a weeknight class.

We anticipate, however, that this curriculum might be adapted for a Sunday school, small group, or discipleship setting. If this is necessary or most appropriate, we urge you to establish an expectation among your students that this course will require more concentration and commitment than a typical Sunday school class would. A tone of serious and earnest study should be set by the instructor before the course even begins.

Before the first class session, you will need to decide when and where this course will be offered. Record this information on the syllabus in the box labeled: “Course Information.” You may also want to include your contact information. The schedule incorporated in the syllabus does not have assigned dates. Please fill in the dates that your class intends to meet. Once you have completed filling out the syllabus, photocopy it so that you may distribute one copy to each student enrolled in the course. The *Student’s Workbook* does not include a syllabus, so your students will not have a syllabus until you distribute one. Photocopying the syllabus is the only photocopying that is required of you by this curriculum.

During the first lesson, we recommend the following outline to structure your time:

- ▷ **Welcome / Prayer (5 min):** Greet the students as they arrive. Open the lesson by exalting God in prayer.
- ▷ **Personal Introductions (20 min):** Ask each student in the room to introduce themselves briefly by answering the following questions (and answer these questions yourself): What is your name? Can you tell the class a little about yourself? Why are you enrolled in this course and what are you hoping to gain from it?
- ▷ **Syllabus and Workbook Review (25 min):** Distribute your customized course syllabus and then guide the class through it, reading each item and answering any questions that the students might have.
- ▷ **Break (5 min)**
- ▷ **Introduction to Christian Hedonism (50 min):** Guide the class through *Lesson 1*. After allowing a few minutes for the students to answer each question, pause to discuss their answers. Lesson 1 is the only lesson you will take your students through without their prior preparation. For all subsequent lessons, students will work through the lesson on their own before coming to class. To prepare yourself for this lesson, you should attempt to answer the questions yourself before consulting the suggested answers in the *Instructor’s Guide*. Reading the introduction to *Desiring God* in its entirety would also be beneficial preparation.

- ▷ **Overview of Next Week / Closing (5 min):** Encourage the students to purchase the required textbooks if they don't have them already. Ensure that they understand what is required of them in preparation for the next class session. Then thank them for coming to the class and dismiss in prayer.

### *Subsequent Lessons*

As the instructor, you will be expected to do all the preparation for each lesson that is required of the students and more. We strongly recommend that you obtain a *Student's Workbook* and attempt to complete the homework on your own before consulting this *Instructor's Guide*. The *Instructor's Guide* provides our suggested answers. Some questions in this curriculum are open-ended and could be answered in different ways. You may find that the answers contained in this manual may not be the clearest or most accurate answers possible. Therefore we encourage you to improve upon our answers if you can. It is essential to understand that **this *Instructor's Guide* is meant to be a resource; the real authority is God's Word.**

Furthermore, we have deliberately omitted lesson outlines for Lessons 2–12. Our recommendation is to open the class in prayer and then immediately start to discuss the integrative assignment the students have done. The discussion could then proceed through each day's study. We consider it unnecessary to lecture through the material the students will have read in the various textbooks—discussing student questions on the reading should adequately cover the material. You will notice that **the material in each lesson should provide you with much more material than you can cover in two hours of thoughtful interaction.** This is not a mistake in design and you should not feel obligated to provide the students with answers for every question. Rather, as the instructor, your responsibility should be to focus on areas where students have questions or interest.

You will also notice that the *Instructor's Guide* has material that is not included in the *Student's Workbook* in the form of Teaching Notes. Consult these notes after thoroughly reviewing the lesson.

### *Teaching Style*

It is our conviction that the best teachers foster an environment in the classroom which engages students. Adults learn by solving problems or by working through things that provoke curiosity or concern. Therefore, we discourage you from lecturing for the entire lesson. Although an instructor will constantly shape conversation, clarifying and correcting as needed, they

will probably not talk for the majority of the lesson. This curriculum is meant to facilitate an investigation into biblical truth—an investigation that is shared by the instructor and the students. Therefore, we encourage you to adopt the posture of a “fellow-learner” who invites participation from everyone in the class.

It might surprise you how eager adults can be to share what they have learned in preparing for each lesson. Therefore, you should invite participation by asking your students to share their discoveries. Here are some of our tips for facilitating discussion that is engaging and helpful:

- ▷ Don't be uncomfortable with silence initially. Once the first student shares their response, others will be likely to join in. If you cut the silence short by prompting the students, they are more likely to wait for you to prompt them every time.
- ▷ Affirm answers whenever possible and draw out the students by asking for clarification. Your aim is to make them feel comfortable sharing their ideas and learning, so be extremely hesitant to shut down a student's contribution or “trump” it with your own. This does not mean, however, that you shouldn't correct false ideas—just do it in a spirit of gentleness and love.
- ▷ Don't allow a single student or several students to dominate the discussion. Involve everyone and intentionally invite participation from those who are more reserved or hesitant.
- ▷ Labor to show the significance of their study. Emphasize the things that the students could not have learned without doing the homework.
- ▷ Avoid talking too much. The instructor should not monopolize the discussion, but rather guide and shape it. If the instructor does the majority of the talking, the students will be less likely to interact and engage, and will therefore not learn as much. Avoid constantly adding the “definitive last word.”
- ▷ The instructor should feel the freedom to linger on a topic or question if the group demonstrates interest. The instructor should also pursue digressions that are helpful and at least somewhat relevant. The instructor, however, should attempt to cover the material. So avoid the extreme of constantly wandering off topic, but also avoid the extreme of limiting the conversation in a way that squelches curiosity or learning.

- ▷ The instructor's passion, or lack of it, is infectious. Therefore, if you demonstrate little enthusiasm for the material, it is almost inevitable that your students will likewise be bored. But if you have a genuine excitement for what you are studying, and if you truly think systematic theology is worthwhile, your class will be impacted positively. Therefore, it is our recommendation that before you come to class, you spend adequate time working through the homework and praying so that you can overflow with genuine enthusiasm for the Bible and for God in class. This point cannot be stressed enough. Delight yourself in God and in his Word!

It may be necessary to again stress that **this curriculum is a resource**. As the instructor, you should feel the freedom to structure the class time and to discuss through the material in a way that promotes the maximum learning and enjoyment of your students. Lingering on certain questions, pursuing *helpful* digressions, examining relevant portions of Scripture, adding other supplemental material, and customizing the curriculum to fit your situation are all heartily approved.

*Questions or Comments?*

If you still have questions after reading this introduction and surveying the curriculum, you may contact Bethlehem College & Seminary at [info@bcsmn.edu](mailto:info@bcsmn.edu). We are also eager for your comments and suggestions! Thanks!



# God-Centered Living: *Christian Hedonism & The Life of Faith*

## SYLLABUS

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The *God-Centered Living* course is an introduction to Christian Hedonism, a philosophy of life that is built on the God of the Bible. The course unfolds two key assertions: 1) the God-centeredness of God informs every aspect of the Christian life; 2) the pursuit of God’s glory and the pursuit of our joy is the same pursuit. Therefore, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” In this course students will examine key biblical passages and then thoughtfully interact with some of the central writings of John Piper: *Desiring God*, *God Is the Gospel*, and *Future Grace*. Biblical study, critical reflection, group discussion, and application are all important components of this course.

### REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

- ▷ An English version of the Bible, preferably the *English Standard Version* (ESV) or *New American Standard Bible* (NASB)
- ▷ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Multnomah Publishers, 2011)
- ▷ John Piper, *God Is the Gospel* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2011)
- ▷ John Piper, *Future Grace* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Multnomah Publishers, 2012)

### REQUIREMENTS

Students are expected to prepare for Lessons 2–12 by completing the lesson pages in a sequential order. Therefore, for each lesson a student should read the Introduction and the Lesson Objectives. Then the student should read the remainder of the lesson, answer the 20 questions contained therein, and complete all the required reading

and the integrative assignment. The student may then review the discussion questions and record their own discussion question. Each lesson's workload has been divided into five daily assignments for the convenience of the student. Students will compose a brief reflection paper at the end of the course.

Students will pass this course if they attend at least 10 class sessions, complete all the assignments, and complete an adequate reflection paper. Please contact the instructor with any problems or concerns.

## REFLECTION PAPER

Students will be required to write a reflection paper (2–3 pages double-spaced), due one week after the last class session. This paper may be emailed as an attachment to the instructor, or mailed to their address.

The reflection paper should consist of the student's answers to the following three questions:

1. Incorporating what you have learned from the three required books, how would you describe Christian Hedonism to someone who had little or no familiarity with it?
2. How has your vision of God and the Christian life been expanded and enriched by participating in this course?
3. In what concrete and specific ways will you strive, by God's grace, to live a more God-centered life?

## SCHEDULE

Lesson	Date	Lesson Title
1		Introduction to Christian Hedonism
2		The God-Centered God
3		The God-Centered Gospel
4		A God-Centered Conversation
5		A God-Centered Faith
6		God-Centered Worship
7		God-Centered Love
8		Being God-Centered in Reading Scripture
9		Being God-Centered in Prayer
10		Being God-Centered with Money
11		Being God-Centered in Suffering
12		The God-Centered Vision of Jonathan Edwards

# Introduction to Christian Hedonism

# 1

## Lesson One

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### 🔗 LESSON OVERVIEW

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online lists the following two definitions for the word “hedonism”:

1. the doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good in life
2. a way of life based on or suggesting the principles of hedonism<sup>1</sup>

And the following definition is John Piper’s starting point for his own usage of the term hedonism:

*a theory according to which a person is motivated to produce one state of affairs in preference to another if, and only if, he thinks it will be more pleasant, or less unpleasant for himself forever.*<sup>2</sup>

Given this understanding of hedonism as a “living for pleasure,” should Christians be hedonists? Should Christians live for their own pleasure, pursue it, and strive to increase it? The (perhaps shocking) answer of this curriculum is “yes!”—and not only should Christians pursue pleasure, but God will *not* be glorified *unless* Christians pursue pleasure! Could this be true? Does the Bible teach a sort of “Christian Hedonism”?

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of “Hedonism” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hedonism> (last accessed Dec 13, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.365-366, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

This lesson will introduce you to the major convictions of Christian Hedonism, a philosophy of life rooted in the Bible proclaiming that pursuing our own pleasure *in God* is essential to the Christian life. It is the task of this course to unfold and apply the glorious truth of Christian Hedonism that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”

#### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to:

- ▷ recognize the prevalence of the common sentiment that pursuing pleasure in acts of charity is somehow selfish
- ▷ restate the five central convictions of Christian Hedonism
- ▷ comprehend, at a basic level, the relationship between God’s glory and our joy



The purpose of this first lesson is to introduce the students to each other and to the course. The personal introductions suggested in the outline of the Instructor's Introduction are not frivolous. Rather, they should be a part of your deliberate effort to create an atmosphere in which student contributions to discussion are valued, respected, and engaged.

As you work through the ten questions presented in this lesson, don't expect your students to grasp the full significance and implications of Christian Hedonism. Rather, do what you can to give the students a flavor for what will be explained and defended throughout the course.

If you've worked through this first lesson in the *Student's Workbook*, you will have noticed that there are a number of blank spaces in each conviction of Christian Hedonism statement. What appears as a blank space in the *Student's Workbook* appears in this *Instructor's Guide* as an underlined word. Therefore, once the students in your class have worked through the questions immediately preceding one of these boxes and have discussed their answers, you will need to provide them with the correct word to fill in the blank. Once the students have filled in all the blank spaces in each box, pause to discuss each conviction. Although this course will offer detailed and biblical support for these five convictions, it would be helpful if the students had at least a preliminary grasp of the meaning of each conviction. Whether the students agree or disagree with these convictions is not very important at this point—there will be plenty of time to reflect upon and discuss these convictions throughout the course.

In addition to what's quoted in the lesson, you might want to share this paragraph from Jonathan Edwards, as quoted by John Piper on page 22 of *Desiring God*:

*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.*





## THE PROBLEM

John Piper's pilgrimage to Christian Hedonism is described in the introduction of *Desiring God*. This lesson will guide you through his series of insights that made him a Christian Hedonist. We begin with Piper's description of a common sentiment: Christians should not pursue their own happiness, especially in acts of service.

*"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."<sup>3</sup>*

1. Restate John Piper's problem in your own words:

- **ANSWER.** *John Piper sensed that being motivated by a desire for his own pleasure was somehow selfish, and therefore sinful.*

Now read the following (fictional) interview of two volunteers at a soup kitchen:

*Reporter: Why do you volunteer your time at this soup kitchen?*

*Volunteer 1: I just keep coming back because it brings me such joy to serve these people. When I see the smiles on their faces when they take a bite of hot food, I feel a surge of happiness. I guess I just really enjoy working here.*

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.18, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

*Volunteer 2: I know that a lot of people have fewer resources than I do and that it is right to share with those who don't have as much. Working here isn't all that glamorous, but when I am feeling weary of serving I just remind myself that I'm doing a good thing in helping those who are less fortunate than I am.*

2. What is the difference in motivation between these two volunteers? Is one of them more virtuous than the other?

This curriculum will argue that the first volunteer is more virtuous than the second, because sincere love finds pleasure in helping others.

- **ANSWER.** *The first volunteer seems motivated by the pleasure she takes in serving; the second volunteer seems motivated by a sense of duty, or doing "the right thing."*

### *Insight #1*

John Piper's "conversion" to Christian Hedonism happened in the short span of a few weeks. During his first quarter in seminary, he was exposed to the following observation as articulated by Blaise Pascal:

*"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. They will never take the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves."*<sup>4</sup>

3. According to the quotation from Blaise Pascal cited above, what is the primary motivation for every human action? Select the correct answer.
  - a) the desire to do the "right thing"
  - b) the desire to be accepted by other people
  - c) there is no single, primary motivation for every action
  - d) a desire for pleasure

**The first conviction of Christian Hedonism:** "The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful."

The conviction statements are fill-in-the-blank sections in the *Student Workbook*, so you will need to remember to read each conviction of Christian Hedonism aloud for your students in order for them to find the underlined words.

4 Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.19, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

John Piper’s second key insight came from the first page of a C. S. Lewis sermon entitled, “The Weight of Glory.” Piper calls this “one of the most influential pages of literature I have ever read.”<sup>5</sup>

*Insight #2*

*“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.”<sup>6</sup>*

4. True / False: According to C. S. Lewis the Christian faith teaches us to control and restrain our desires for pleasure.

***The second conviction of Christian Hedonism:*** “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.”

Remember to read this section aloud so that your students can fill in the blanks left in the *Student Workbook*.

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5 Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.19, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

6 C. S. Lewis as quoted by John Piper in *Desiring God*, 20.

### Insight #3

The third insight is again articulated by Blaise Pascal:

*“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.”<sup>7</sup>*

5. Working from this insight, write a brief response to this statement. “I believe in God because faith strengthens my marriage. It has also been shown that having faith is good for your health and allows you to live longer.”
  - **ANSWER.** *God must not be made a means to something else that you perceive as more valuable than him, whether that be a strong marriage, physical health, or long life. Only God himself can satisfy our deepest longings and desires.*

Remember to read aloud so that students can fill in the blanks in the workbook.

**The third conviction of Christian Hedonism:** “The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.”

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<sup>7</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.21, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

The fourth insight is one that we could all arrive at if we reflected upon our own experience.

6. Think about how you might answer each of the following questions. Do your answers point to a common reality of human nature? What is the relationship between enjoyment and praise?
- Why do two people who are in love have a hard time restraining public expressions of their affection?
  - Is it more enjoyable to watch a sporting event alone or with a friend? Why?
  - After eating at a delicious but little known restaurant, what is your natural impulse when you meet someone you know and are discussing food?
  - **ANSWER.** *People in love feel compelled to praise one another because of the joy that is welling up inside them. It's more enjoyable to watch sports with a friend so that you can share your excitement for the game in expressions such as "Wow! Did you see that?!" After discovering a great restaurant, the natural impulse is to commend it to others. All of these daily experiences point to the truth that praise expresses and completes our enjoyment of a thing.*

Here is C. S. Lewis's description of the phenomenon we've been considering:

*"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 ... 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."*<sup>8</sup>

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8 Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.20-21, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

7. According to C. S. Lewis, what is the relationship between commending your favorite restaurant to someone else and praising God?

· **ANSWER.** *Lewis argues that just as your enjoyment of a good restaurant naturally results in commending it, the same should be true of our enjoyment in God—it should compel us to joyful praise.*

Remember to read aloud so that students can fill in the blanks in the workbook.

*The fourth conviction of Christian Hedonism:* “The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.”

*Insight #5*

After reading the previous insights in Pascal and Lewis, Piper’s emerging Hedonism was marvelously confirmed by the language of the Psalms.

Psalm 37:4

<sup>4</sup> *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

Psalm 42:1–2

<sup>1</sup> *As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.* <sup>2</sup> *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

Psalm 63:1

<sup>1</sup> *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 36:7–8

<sup>7</sup> *How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.* <sup>8</sup> *They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*

Psalm 34:8

<sup>8</sup> *Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!*

Psalm 119:103

<sup>103</sup> *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

Psalm 43:4

<sup>4</sup> Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

Psalm 16:11

<sup>11</sup> ... In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

8. Taken together, what do these verses teach us about God and the Christian life?

- **ANSWER.** *They teach us that God himself is infinitely full of joy and that we are commanded to pursue our joy in his joy.*

**The fifth conviction of Christian Hedonism:** “To the extent 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.*”

Remember to read aloud so that students can fill in the blanks in the workbook.

Notice the last sentence of the fifth conviction of Christian Hedonism. Now look at the following two statements:

“*The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*”

“*The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever.*”

9. What is the difference between these two statements? Why might the difference be significant?

- **ANSWER.** *The first statement leaves the relationship between glorifying God and enjoying him ambiguous by connecting them with the word “and.” This might cause someone to think that it is possible to glorify God without enjoying him, or vice versa, though the statement does indicate that these two together are the chief end (singular) of man. The second statement makes the relationship clear by positing that we glorify God by enjoying him. (See *God Is the Gospel*, 106 fn 1.)*

## THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

After answering several potential objections and offering a preliminary definition of Christian Hedonism, Piper concludes the introduction with this paragraph:

*“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.”<sup>9</sup>*

10. Why might Piper have ended the introduction in this way?

- **ANSWER.** Piper wanted to make it clear that this philosophy of Christian Hedonism is not his own idea. Rather, he believes that Christian Hedonism is what the Bible teaches. Therefore, if the reader of his book is not convinced from Scripture that Christian Hedonism is true, then they should not adopt it as a way of life.

## § ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As the instructor, if are not familiar with Christian Hedonism, these resources are very important for you to be familiar with. It would also be helpful for you to thoroughly acquaint yourself with the resources at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), including the article “We Want You to Be a Christian Hedonist!”

- John Piper, *Desiring God*, Preface & Introduction. Also see Appendix 1, “Why Call It Christian Hedonism?” 308–312.

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# The God-Centered God

# 2

## Lesson Two

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

If someone were to ask you, “Who has the most passionate heart for God in the entire universe?” how would you respond? If you were to answer this question by saying “the redeemed,” or “the angels,” you would be wrong.

And here is another question, “What is God most passionate about? What is the chief end of God?” Although many people have asked and tried to answer the question of what we, as humans, should be passionate about, not many have asked what God is passionate about.

Here is the stunning answer of John Piper:

*The ultimate foundation for our passion to see God glorified is his own passion to be glorified. God is central and supreme in his own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God’s glory in his own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and great commandment. With all his heart and soul and strength and mind he delights in the glory of his manifold perfections. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God’s heart.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010), 39. Used by permission.

As we will see, in order to live a life that is centered on the person of God, we need to first understand what is at the center of God's affections, and priorities, and plans. It is the utter God-centeredness of God that compels us, as imitators of him, to live as God-centered worshippers.

#### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ identify God's overarching goal in all he does
- ▷ recognize the relationship between God's sovereignty and God's joy
- ▷ explain why God's pursuit of his own glory is not opposed to our pursuit of joy



This lesson is foundational for all that will follow. As we've stated in the introduction to this lesson, if our desire is to live in a God-centered way that brings God glory, it is crucial to understand God's own God-centeredness. Stress to your students that this is not merely theoretical or pedantic. Hopefully they will recognize from the integrative assignment that the truth presented in this lesson can be life-transforming. Knowing that God pursues our joy and satisfaction in him is a truth that will inspire a lifetime of trust, admiration, hope, and rejoicing.

Please also make it clear that God's God-centeredness, though good news for those who trust in him, is horrifying news for those who don't recognize God's glory and give him the honor that is due his name. The following excerpt from John Piper's sermon entitled "The Lord Whose Name is Jealous" (found at [DesiringGod.org](http://DesiringGod.org)), makes this clear:

*God is infinitely jealous for the honor of his name, and responds with terrible wrath against those whose hearts should belong to him but go after other things. For example, in Ezekiel 16:38–40 he says to faithless Israel, "I will judge you as women who break wedlock and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. And I will give you into the hand of your lovers and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber ... they shall strip you of your clothes and take your fair jewels, and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a host against you and cut you to pieces with swords."*

*Please heed to this warning. The jealousy of God for your undivided love and devotion will always have the last say. Whatever lures your affections away from God with deceptive attraction will come back to strip you bare and cut you in pieces. It is a horrifying thing to use your God-given life to commit adultery against the Almighty.*

*But for those of you who have been truly united to Christ and who keep your vows to forsake all others and cleave only to him and live for his honor—for you the jealousy of God is a great comfort and a great hope. Since God is infinitely jealous for the honor of his name, anything and anybody who threatens the good of his faithful wife will be opposed with divine omnipotence.*

*God's jealousy is a great threat to those who play the harlot and sell their heart to the world and make a cuckold out of God. But his jealousy is a great comfort to those who keep their covenant vows and become strangers and exiles in the world.*



## Day 1

### THE FOUNDATION OF GOD'S HAPPINESS

This lesson will attempt to support, from the Bible, the following five assertions:

1. God is absolutely sovereign over the world.
2. God is infinitely happy; he is never hindered from doing what he pleases.
3. God delights in his own glory above all else; his glory is uppermost in his affections.
4. God's pursuit of the praise of his people is supremely loving.
5. Pursuing God's glory and pursuing our joy is the same pursuit!

This first day's study will concentrate on the first two of these assertions.

Psalm 115:2–7

*<sup>2</sup> Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" <sup>3</sup> Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. <sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat.*

1. How is the God of Israel contrasted with idols in this passage? Select the correct answer.
  - a) God is worthy of praise, and idols are not.
  - b) God cannot be seen, but idols can be seen.
  - c) God does whatever he wants; idols are powerless.
  - d) There is only one God, but there are many idols.

2. Expand and paraphrase the statement, “he does all that he pleases.”

- **ANSWER.** *God perfectly carries out everything that gives him pleasure—nothing stops him from doing what he wants to do.*

Psalm 135:5–6

<sup>5</sup> For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. <sup>6</sup> Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

*“What these two verses (Psalm 135:6; 115:3) teach is that everything God takes pleasure in doing, he does and cannot be hindered from doing. Or to put it somewhat differently, all that he does he takes pleasure in. He cannot be kept back from doing what he delights most to do. And he cannot be forced to do what he does not delight in. And this is true everywhere in the universe. That’s the meaning of ‘in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps’ (Psalm 135:6).”<sup>11</sup>*

Acts 4:27–28

<sup>27</sup> ... for 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, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

3. True / False: God predestined the crucifixion of his holy servant Jesus.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 31–37

▷ stop at “The Struggle and Solution of Jonathan Edwards”

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpt(s) from *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* by John Piper, p.52, copyright © 1991, 2000 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

4. Before you read this section, had you ever considered the question of what is the chief end of God? If so, how would you have answered this question? Do you agree with the answer that John Piper presents?

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

5. What is the relationship between 1) God's joy, 2) God's sovereignty, and 3) our joy?

- **ANSWER.** *God's sovereignty is the foundation of God's joy. Since none of his purposes can be thwarted, he must do all that he pleases (Psalm 115:3) and be the happiest of all beings. And God's joy is the foundation of our joy, for we seek our happiness in God himself.*

## Day 2

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### STRUGGLING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

It is outside of the scope of this lesson to give a full-blown defense of God's absolute sovereignty. Hopefully the many biblical passages you examined in *Desiring God* on pages 32–37, were compelling.

For those who object to God's sovereignty, it is our sense that objections are not typically directed to the biblical passages that clearly teach God's sovereignty, but are directed to the logical problems surrounding God's sovereignty and evil. Therefore, today's study will take a slight detour to briefly address this concern.

Psalm 115:3

<sup>3</sup> *Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.*

Psalm 135:6

<sup>6</sup> *Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.*

Ezekiel 18:23, 31–32

<sup>23</sup> *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ... <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.*

Deuteronomy 28:63

<sup>63</sup> *And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.*

6. Underline all the references to delight or pleasure in the texts above. How do you reconcile the seeming contradiction in these verses?

• **ANSWER.** *Answers may vary.*

This course will not offer an extended defense of the assertion that God is sovereign over all things. If that is an issue for students within your class, we recommend consulting the resources listed in the first footnote of chapter 1 of *Desiring God* (page 33). In addition, please now see the *Theological Foundations 1* and *Theological Foundations 2* courses available through BCS Press. These two courses present a systematic theology in which the absolute sovereignty of God is defended and permeates everything else that is taught.

As we will see below, in order to be faithful to these biblical texts, we must say that there is a sense in which God takes pleasure in the death of the wicked, for example, and a sense in which he does not. God does not delight in evil in and of itself, but rejoices to see how evil serves his good purposes.

Acts 3:13–15, 17–19

<sup>13</sup> *The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ... <sup>17</sup> And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup> But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. <sup>19</sup> Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out ...*

Isaiah 53:10 (NASB)

<sup>10</sup> *But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief...*

7. Did God take pleasure in the denial and murder of his Son?

- **ANSWER.** *Again, since it was clearly wicked to put to death the perfectly innocent Son of God, God could not have taken pleasure in the sinful act of crucifixion. And yet, this great evil was always his plan, and as part of this plan God was pleased to crush his own Son.*

We will now examine an extended quotation that attempts to reconcile the tension we've observed in the preceding biblical texts.

*“The Bible shows (in Deuteronomy 28:63; Proverbs 1:24–26; Revelation 18:20; Ezekiel 5:13; and Isaiah 30:31–32) that even acts of judgment which in one sense do not please God in another sense do please him. Our method is not to choose between these texts, or to cancel out one by the other, but to go deep enough into the mysterious mind of God to see (as far as possible) how both are true. How shall we account for this apparent tension?*

*The answer I propose is that God is grieved in one sense by the death of the wicked, and pleased in another. God's emotional life is infinitely complex beyond our ability to fully comprehend. For example, who can comprehend that the Lord hears in one moment of time the prayers of 10 million Christians around the world, and sympathizes with each one personally and individually as a caring Father (as Hebrews 4:15 says), even though among those 10 million prayers some are brokenhearted and some are bursting with joy? How can God weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice when they are both coming to him at the same time—in fact, are always coming to*

him with no break at all? Or who can comprehend that God is angry at the sin of the world every day (Psalm 7:11), and yet every day, every moment, he is rejoicing with tremendous joy because somewhere in the world a sinner is repenting (Luke 15:7, 10, 23)? Who can comprehend that God continually burns with hot anger at the rebellion of the wicked and grieves over the unholy speech of his people (Ephesians 4:29–30), yet takes pleasure in them daily (Psalm 149:4), and ceaselessly makes merry over penitent prodigals who come home? Who of us could dare say what complex of emotions is not possible for God? All we have to go on here is what he has chosen to tell us in the Bible. And what he has told us is that there is a sense in which he does not experience pleasure in the judgment of the wicked and there is a sense in which he does.”<sup>12</sup>

8. Is this explanation understandable to you? Is it satisfying? Explain.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 38–40

▷ start at “The Struggle and Solution of Jonathan Edwards”

9. Edwards claims, “Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.”<sup>13</sup> Do you have a similar testimony? Explain.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

10. Respond to this statement: “I cannot believe that God delights in everything that he does because that would mean he delights in evil.”

· **ANSWER.** *Although it may be difficult for us to understand, God takes no pleasure in evil in and of itself, while at the same time delighting in how evil accomplishes his good, wise, and sovereign purposes.*

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## Day 3

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### GOD'S HAPPINESS IS IN HIMSELF

After taking somewhat of a detour in the previous day's study, we now return to the list of assertions that this lesson is seeking to establish. More specifically, we will examine the third assertion listed in Day 1's study: "God delights in his own glory above all else; his glory is uppermost in his affections." We will see that this is true by surveying why God does what he does throughout redemptive history.

Though our sample of texts will be very limited, notice these verses about God's creation.

Psalm 8:1

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Psalm 19:1

<sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Isaiah 6:2–3

<sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Isaiah 43:6–7

<sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, <sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

11. What is the purpose of the created world? What is the purpose behind the creation of man?

• **ANSWER.** *The created world exists to display the glory of God; the whole earth is full of his glory. In addition, mankind was formed and made for the glory of God.*

For an extended, biblical defense of the assertion that God's ultimate goal in all he does is to preserve and display his glory, see Appendix 1 of *Desiring God*.

Surveying all the biblical texts that are cited in that appendix might be a helpful exercise to do in class if some of your students need additional biblical confirmation for the centrality of God's glory.

It is clear that God is worthy of all glory for what he has made.

Revelation 4:11

*<sup>11</sup> Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*

Now notice what God's intention was behind his deliverance of Israel in the plagues upon Egypt and then Israel's exodus.

Exodus 9:13–16

*<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. <sup>14</sup> For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. <sup>15</sup> For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. <sup>16</sup> But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.""*

Exodus 14:13–18

*<sup>13</sup> And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." <sup>15</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. <sup>16</sup> Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup> And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."*

12. Why does God deliver Israel from Egypt in the way that he does?

- **ANSWER.** *God does not wipe out Pharaoh and the Egyptians in one stroke because he intends to display his power in Pharaoh. God wants his name (or glory) to be proclaimed in all the earth. By fighting Israel's battle himself (Ex 14:14), God will demonstrate that it is by his power alone that Israel is delivered. Again, he does this so that he would be glorified and known as the true God.*

Now notice this passage about the new deliverance God would bring for his people.

Psalm 79:9

*<sup>9</sup> Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!*

And here is the testimony of Jesus:

John 17:1–5

*<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”*

13. What was Jesus' intention while on earth?

- **ANSWER.** *Jesus intended to accomplish all the work that his Father gave him to do. It is clear that in doing these things, Jesus brought the Father glory. In John 17:1–2 Jesus prays that the Father would be glorified in the Son. Jesus (as God) delights to give glory to the Father and receive glory from the Father.*

Another strand of evidence for the centrality of God's glory in God's own heart is the wrath of God against all sin. Sin is described in Romans 3:23 as falling short of the glory of God—failing to reflect the glory of God as we ought. Sin is an affront to God because it belittles his glory. God cannot tolerate sin because God cannot tolerate anything that would slander his own infinite worth.

Jeremiah 13:11

*<sup>11</sup> For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the LORD, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.*

Romans 1:18, 21–23

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ...

<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Isaiah 48:9–11

<sup>9</sup> For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. <sup>10</sup> Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. <sup>11</sup> 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.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 41–45

▷ stop at “Is God for Us or for Himself?”

14. According to John Piper, what is God's ultimate goal? Select the correct answer.

- a) to save sinners
- b) to preserve and display his glory
- c) we cannot know God's ultimate goal
- d) to redeem this fallen world

15. When Piper cites Edwards' claim, “It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow,” what false idea is he combating?

- **ANSWER.** Piper is responding to the idea that God was lacking in some perfection which the world was created to supply. Piper's contention is that God was not compelled to create the world because of any lack or deficiency in himself. Rather, “all His works are simply the spillover of His infinite exuberance for His own excellence” (44).

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 99–102

## Day 4

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### IS GOD FOR US OR FOR HIMSELF?

As we conclude this lesson, we will take up the most common objection to what we've attempted to establish thus far. The most common objection is stated well by Dr. Sam Storms:

*“What is the pre-eminent passion in God’s heart? What is God’s greatest pleasure? In what does God take supreme delight? I want to suggest that the pre-eminent passion in God’s heart is his own glory. God is at the center of his own affections. The supreme love of God’s life is God. God is pre-eminently committed to the fame of his name. God is himself the end for which God created the world. Better, still, God’s immediate goal in all he does is his own glory. God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys and delivers in order to make known who He is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor and glory of which He and He alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy.*

*The question I most often hear in response to this is that if God loves himself pre-eminently, how can he love me at all? How can we say that God is for us and that he desires our happiness if he is primarily for himself and his own glory?”<sup>14</sup>*

We will approach this question (or objection) indirectly. We will start by considering something that we've already established.

Isaiah 42:8

*<sup>8</sup> I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.*

Isaiah 48:11

*<sup>11</sup> 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.*

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<sup>14</sup> This excerpt is from an online article entitled, “What Is Christian Hedonism?” at <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/>. Last accessed May 24, 2016.

Exodus 34:12–14

<sup>12</sup> Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. <sup>13</sup> You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim <sup>14</sup> (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God) ...

Psalm 97:6–7

<sup>6</sup> The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory. <sup>7</sup> All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods!

16. God is jealous for his own glory; he will not allow his glory to go to another. But what if God's glory was not supreme in God's own heart?

· **ANSWER.** *There are many disastrous consequences which would flow from this: 1) God would cease to be God if he exchanged his own glory for the glory of any created thing (cf. Romans 1:23; Jeremiah 2:11). Or, at least, he would be unrighteous; 2) God would be hypocritical in demanding our worship. For why should we worship God if God does not esteem himself above all things? 3) We would be left in utter doubt and despair. For where would we go to find truth and ultimate value if God has abandoned his own infinite worth?*

The next move in this argument takes for granted that “no good thing does [God] withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11). Or, as James says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). An aspect of God's love, then, is to give good gifts to his children. Therefore, the following implication must also be true: If God did not give us good gifts, and especially if he withheld the greatest gift from us, then he would not love us.

The question then becomes, what is the greatest gift that God gives to us? For if he didn't give us that, he would certainly be unloving toward us.

17. What do you consider to be God's greatest gift to us?

- **ANSWER.** *Answers may vary.*

Finally, consider the following commands.

Psalm 33:1–3

<sup>1</sup> *Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright.* <sup>2</sup> *Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!* <sup>3</sup> *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

Psalm 113:1

<sup>1</sup> *Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD!*

Matthew 25:21

<sup>21</sup> *Enter into the joy of your master.*

Philippians 4:4

<sup>4</sup> *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

18. Are these commands an expression of God's love or an expression of his desire for praise?

- **ANSWER.** *The glorious news is that these commands are both an expression of God's love and an expression of his desire for praise. We never have to choose between glorifying God and being (eternally) happy! Therefore, God is loving in the pursuit of his own praise.*

Therefore, we have seen that ...

- ▷ God is absolutely sovereign over the world.
- ▷ God is infinitely happy; he is never hindered from doing what he pleases.
- ▷ God delights in his own glory above all else; his glory is uppermost in his affections.
- ▷ God's pursuit of the praise of his people is supremely loving.
- ▷ Pursuing God's glory and pursuing our joy is the same pursuit!

God's greatest gift is the gift of himself. Fellowship with God and the enjoyment of his glory is the chief good of the gospel. This idea will be developed and defended in the next lesson—Lesson 3. If God withheld our enjoyment of his glory, he would be unloving toward us. Therefore, he must elevate his glory above all things and never compromise it if he truly is going to be for us.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 45–50

▷ start at “Is God for Us or for Himself?”

19. Briefly note the two common objections to the idea that God exalts himself. Then summarize John Piper’s response to these objections.

· **ANSWER.** *Some object to this idea because we don’t enjoy people who are like that and because the Bible teaches us not to be like that. But for God to be for us, he must be for himself, and if he were not for himself he would be an idolater.*

20. “We praise what we enjoy because the delight is incomplete until it is expressed in praise” (49) is the solution to which question or problem?

· **ANSWER.** *It is the solution to why God must be for himself and his praise, because if it is our highest joy to worship him, then it is loving for him to command us to praise him.*



In the beginning of the second chapter of *Desiring God*, John Piper summarizes the chapter you've read in this lesson (Chapter 1) and draws the following implication:

*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 most happy is what God delights in with all his heart and with all his soul.*

*... 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 ...<sup>15</sup>*

Do these assertions really follow from what we've learned in this lesson? Explain. Then apply the glorious truth of these paragraphs to a specific situation in your life. Record your reflections.

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<sup>15</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.53-54, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).
- ▷ John Piper, "Loving God for Who He Is: A Pastor's Perspective," an online article on [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)
- ▷ John Piper, *Desiring God*, Appendix 1: Why Call it Christian Hedonism?
- ▷ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
- ▷ Sam Storms, *Pleasures Evermore* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000).
- ▷ Sam Storms, *One Thing* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publishers, 2004).



# The God-Centered Gospel

# 3

## Lesson Three

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

In this lesson we will study a provocative and perhaps puzzling claim: God is the gospel. It is our prayer that this lesson would strengthen, or maybe restore, the joy of your salvation (Psalm 51:12). But what exactly is the joy of our salvation? Read this testimony from John Piper:

*I visited [Dr. Widen] in the hospital about 16 years ago as he was dying. He looked up at me from his bed with a smile, and said, “Pastor John, the greatest thing in the world is to be saved.”*

*Do you feel this? If not, you probably never really felt very lost and desperate before the judgment of God, or threatened by an eternity of conscious torment in hell. O, how we love being saved after we have just come close to being killed. Perhaps by a powerful ocean undertow. Or getting a finger caught in the drain at the bottom of a swimming pool (yes, filled with water!). Or almost walking out in front of a car which you did not see that speeds by just three feet from you at 40 miles-an-hour, but your wife’s voice caught you in the split second before stepping into death. Or a remission from a long battle with cancer. Or release from a prison camp in the Gulag after 16 years of expecting death. Or after surviving a plane crash inexplicably when others perished.*

*O how we love life at those moments, and cleave to everything precious. So it is when you taste the preciousness of being saved from sin. Not just the words. Not just a fact learned from the Bible, but really feeling that you are justly damned and*

*hopelessly lost and cut off from God and life and joy. Then to learn that God has made a way. That he will forgive you. That he will accept you and love you and work all things for your good. That ALL your sins can be forgiven and cast into the deepest sea and never brought up against you any more. O, the preciousness of being saved from sin and judgment and hell!*

*But is it Biblical to say that the greatest thing in the world is to be saved? Well, of course, the greatest thing in the world is GOD. But Dr. Widen did not mean to compare our experience with God. He meant to compare it to all other experiences. The reason being saved is the greatest experience in the world is because GOD is the greatest Person in the world, and being saved means being rescued from sin and damnation to know and enjoy God forever. If GOD were not the greatest Reality in the universe, being saved to be with him would not be the greatest thing in the universe.<sup>16</sup>*

This lesson will examine and defend the idea that salvation is great because fellowship with the living God is great—the greatest thing in the world.

#### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ identify an essential element to any gospel presentation that is commonly missing
- ▷ describe how the term “gospel” is used in the Bible
- ▷ defend the idea that delight in God is necessary for true repentance

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<sup>16</sup> John Piper, “The Greatest Thing in the World Is to be Saved,” an online article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org). Throughout this curriculum we will only provide titles (and not the full web addresses) for online articles and sermons at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org). Use the Title Index of the Resource Library to locate these resources.



An engaging, in-class exercise might be to bring in gospel tracts or other short, attempted summaries of the gospel and evaluate them on the basis of what was studied in this lesson.

A very common response to the material presented in this lesson is one of concern. As people put the penetrating, God-centered questions to themselves, some may doubt whether they have ever embraced God as the highest good of the gospel. This is a good reaction. Don't be too quick to give assurance to those who are wrestling with godly grief and repentance. It is even possible that some students in your class might become truly born again during this course.

For those who are trusting and delighting in Christ (as far as you can discern), and are still wrestling with doubt and despair, point them to the section entitled, "Seeing the Glory of Christ Has Its Ups and Downs" (*God Is the Gospel*, pages 55–56). This is an important section for you to use pastorally! Here is a key excerpt:

The ability to see spiritual beauty is not unwavering. There are ups and downs in our fellowship with Christ. There are times of beclouded vision, especially if sin gets the upper hand in our lives for a season. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Yes, and this is not an all-or-nothing reality. There are degrees of purity and degrees of seeing. Only when we are perfected in the age to come will our seeing be totally unclouded. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). (55)

So yes, this lesson is designed to wake those who may have become dull to the glory of God. But no, Piper is not teaching perfectionism. The grace of God that opens our eyes to his glory and conforms us to it by degrees is also the grace of God that forgives all our ongoing sins and short comings.

The entire next lesson—"A God-Centered Conversion"—will develop some of the ideas presented here in seed form. It will further support the claim that the initial apprehension of the glory of God in the gospel (i.e., conversion) is only possible by a supernatural and gracious work of God.

You will notice that there is a lot of overlap between these first few lessons. The ordering is intentional. First, we must see the glory and happiness of God (Lesson 2). The pursuit of our joy in beholding God's glory is the chief end and the chief good of man (Lesson 2 and 3). It is only in seeing God's glory and the sweetness of it (though we see and taste it imperfectly) that we are saved (Lesson 4). As God's glory becomes the central and centering reality of our life, we learn to live a life of God-centered faith (Lesson 5) and worship (Lesson 6), which then flows to others in acts of love (Lesson 7). Hopefully the progression and repetition of the core convictions of Christian Hedonism will enable your students to better understand how to live a life centered on God.



## Day 1

### WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST

What does the world need? Perhaps you are familiar with the lyrics of the song:

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love;  
it's the only thing that there's just too little of.  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love;  
no, not just for some but for everyone.*<sup>17</sup>

“Love” would probably be many people’s answer to the question of what the world needs. Some might say world peace; others would say the forgiveness of sins.

What does Paul seem to need—or at least, desire—most?

Philippians 1:18–24

*<sup>18</sup> What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, <sup>20</sup> as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup> But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.*

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<sup>17</sup> The lyrics to “What the World Needs Now is Love” were originally written by Hal David and sung by Jackie DeShannon.

Notice that he does not say that death will bring the absence of pain, being reunited with loved ones, etc.

1. How can Paul say “to die is gain”? How can death be gain when, in death, he loses every earthly thing?

- **ANSWER.** *Paul can say death is gain because when he dies he has the hope of departing and being with Christ. He must consider being with Christ better—far better—than anything this earthly life can afford.*

Now compare Paul’s testimony to what Peter has to say about our salvation.

1 Peter 3:17–18

<sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit ...

2. According to Peter, what is the purpose of our salvation?

- **ANSWER.** *Our salvation in Christ’s death for sin was intended to “bring us to God.” Therefore, reconciliation to God and fellowship with God seems to be the purpose.*

When asked what the gospel does for sinful man, many would say that the gospel gets us to heaven. But why would anyone want to be in heaven? What’s in heaven that makes it so desirable to be there? How we answer these questions is critical.

Revelation 21:1–7

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> And he said to

me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. <sup>7</sup> The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

3. According to this description of the Christian’s final hope, what is the central and foundational blessing of the new heaven and new earth?

- **ANSWER.** *The foundational blessing is articulated in verse 3: “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” Although it is true that many blessings flow from God’s presence—including the removal of tears, death, and pain, and the water of eternal life—the ultimate blessing is our relationship with the everlasting God: “I will be his God and he will be my son” (v. 7).*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 11–17

4. Ask yourself these questions and record your reflections below.
    - Do you feel more loved because God makes much of you, or because, at the cost of his Son, he enables you to enjoy making much of him forever? (11)
    - Does your happiness hang on seeing the cross of Christ as a witness to your worth, or as a way to enjoy God’s worth forever? (11–12)
    - If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there? (15)
- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

Instructors, ensure that  
your students get this!

5. What does Piper mean when he says, “God is the gospel”?

- **ANSWER.** *To quote him: “I mean that the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment” (13).*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 55–63

- ▷ start at “Six Crucial Truths to Summarize Our Need and God’s Provision”
- ▷ stop at “What is Conversion?”

## Day 2

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### DEFINING THE GOSPEL

Having introduced the key assertion of this lesson, that God is the gospel, we will now explain what the term gospel means. Although the term is used frequently in the New Testament, the meaning is often assumed. In this day's study we will look at three key passages in our attempt to form at least a preliminary understanding of this important word.

Mark 1:1, 14–15

<sup>1</sup> *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ...* <sup>14</sup> *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,* <sup>15</sup> *and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

6. According to this passage, what is included in the term “gospel”?

- **ANSWER.** *In Jesus' preaching, the term gospel is often used in conjunction with the kingdom of God, which we understand to mean the sovereign reign of God. The promised restoration of the people of God was foretold in the prophets and Jesus is announcing, by proclaiming the gospel, that God is breaking into the world with his kingly authority. This calls for repentance and belief.*

Identifying different “layers” to the gospel message can be a helpful way of presenting what the gospel is. Please note that gospel events include Jesus' birth, his ministry in the power of the Spirit, his proclamation of the kingdom of God, his perfect life of obedience to the Father—all culminating in his atoning death and resurrection, and then the subsequent pouring out of the Spirit and the blessing extended to the Gentiles.

As many commentators recognize, Paul introduces the phrase “the gospel of God” in Romans 1:1 and then unpacks what he means by it in verses 2–4.

Romans 1:1–5

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised before-hand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations ...*

7. According to this passage, what is included in the gospel?

- **ANSWER.** *The gospel is good news that was planned and promised beforehand; it concerns the divine Son of God who became a man in order to be the king of God's people; though he was crucified (implied), he was raised to reign as the world's true Lord, and all human obedience is rightly directed toward him.*

Finally, we will examine one more passage that clearly defines the gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:1–5

*<sup>1</sup> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*

8. What is the gospel?

- **ANSWER.** *Simply put, the gospel is the message that Jesus, who is the promised Messiah of Israel, died for the sins of his people, was buried, and was triumphantly raised from the dead by God. This all happened according to the plan of God, revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures.*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 25–32

▷ stop at “What the Cross Purchased Makes the Cross Good News”

9. Compare what John Piper says about the gospel to your answers to the three preceding questions. How has your understanding of the term “gospel” been enriched?

• **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

Now examine an excerpt from a blog post concerning the multi-layered nature of the gospel:

*“Piper recounted five essential elements of the gospel:*

1. *The Gospel is an event. Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.*
2. *He achieved something when he died. John unpacked seven **achievements**:*
  1. *Christ absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf. (Galatians 3:13)*
  2. *He bore our sins and purchased our forgiveness. The payment and purchase occurred 2,000 years ago—forgiveness (on a personal level) comes later.*
  3. *He provided a complete and perfect righteousness for us. Philippians 2 tells us he was obedient unto death. And that obedience—the obedience of Jesus Christ—is the obedience of Romans 5:19. Christ completed it.*
  4. *He defeated death itself. (Hebrews 2:14)*
  5. *He disarmed Satan by suffering. (Colossians 2:14) Satan can beat us up, but he cannot damn us, because his one weapon (unpaid sin) is gone. Where? Nailed to a cross. And Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire someday.*
  6. *Christ purchased perfect final healing and peace for His people. (Isaiah 53:4–5) Some of this is experienced in our lifetime; most of it is not experienced until we reach heaven.*
  7. *Christ secured for us eternal fellowship with him. (1 Peter 3:18)*
3. *The **free offer** to be received by faith alone, not works. If there is a historical event (Christ’s death), and it is offered to works, then there is no gospel. We nullify the cross if we make our justification by works. So faith becomes crucial.*

4. *The application of the achievement to us.*
  1. *When the Holy Spirit awakens us, we see Christ for who he really is, and we repent and cleave to him in faith.*
  2. *And when that happened, our sins were forgiven and we were counted righteous in Christ.*
  3. *It all happens through faith alone. Justification, forgiveness, and eternal life were purchased at the cross, but they become ours by faith when we believe. John emphasized that although step 4 is crucial, we should start our testimonies with the historical event of step 1 (which secured step 4).*

*Now most gospel teaching stops here, John noted. But we must press on:*

5. *God is the gospel. We must embrace Christ as the gospel.”<sup>18</sup>*

10. Notice the five aspects to the gospel outlined above: 1) gospel events; 2) gospel achievements; 3) the free offer of the gospel; 4) the personal application of gospel achievements; and 5) the goal and highest good of the gospel. How does this relate to what you’ve read?

- **ANSWER.** *The delineation of these five aspects to the gospel is a further clarification and expansion of what John Piper writes in the section assigned for today. In this section of *God Is the Gospel*, Piper mentions gospel events, accomplishments, the promise of salvation, and the experience of salvation (31).*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 32–38

- ▷ start at “What the Cross Purchased Makes the Cross Good News”

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<sup>18</sup> A blog post entitled “CDG Conference Session 1” originally available at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

## Day 3

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### WHAT MAKES THE GOOD NEWS GOOD

Having considered the different aspects of the gospel (like facets of a diamond), please remember the central thrust of this lesson:

*“Until the gospel events of Good Friday and Easter and the gospel promises of justification and eternal life lead you to behold and embrace God himself as your highest joy, you have not embraced the gospel of God.”<sup>19</sup>*

We will turn again to this central idea in this day’s study, piling up more proof from Scripture.

Isaiah 40:3–9

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” <sup>6</sup> A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. <sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

11. According to this Old Testament text, what is the central message of the gospel, the “good news” that was to be proclaimed?

- **ANSWER.** *The good news was the return of the LORD to Zion after Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people sent into exile. In the LORD’s return, his glory would be revealed and “all flesh” would see it. Who could have known, though, that the glory of the LORD would be revealed in a man from Nazareth!*

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<sup>19</sup> John Piper, *God Is the Gospel*, 37–38.

As Isaiah prophesies, the glory of the LORD would be revealed (Isaiah 40:5). But why is this good news?

Exodus 33:17–18

<sup>17</sup> *And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”* <sup>18</sup> *Moses said, “Please show me your glory.”*

Psalm 27:4

<sup>4</sup> *One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.*

Psalm 63:1–8

<sup>1</sup> *A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. 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.* <sup>2</sup> *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.* <sup>3</sup> *Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.* <sup>4</sup> *So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.* <sup>5</sup> *My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,* <sup>6</sup> *when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;* <sup>7</sup> *for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.* <sup>8</sup> *My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

12. How do the requests and desires of Moses and David instruct us?

- **ANSWER.** *We see in these passages that the godly desire to see a display of God’s glory and beauty. In fact, a revelation of God’s glory is the only thing that will satisfy the cravings of the human soul. God alone satisfies. Our souls should thirst for him and our souls should cling to him.*

How, then, does God fulfill the word he spoke to Isaiah and answer the longings of the human heart? Why does the gospel of God concern the man *Jesus*?

**John 1:14–18**

<sup>14</sup> *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* <sup>15</sup> *(John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”)* <sup>16</sup> *And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* <sup>17</sup> *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* <sup>18</sup> *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*

**Hebrews 1:1–3**

<sup>1</sup> *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,* <sup>2</sup> *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.* <sup>3</sup> *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*

13. What do we learn from these passages about the glory of God?

- **ANSWER.** *These passages anticipate what will be studied later in this lesson. As 2 Corinthians 4:4–6 tell us, the glory of God is revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:14, 18), since Jesus is the perfect image of God (cf. Hebrews 1:3).*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 41–47

- ▷ stop at “What Is the Supreme Good That Makes the Gospel Good News?”

14. What does it mean that justification is the heart but not the highest good of the gospel?

- **ANSWER.** *Piper's assertion is that justification "addresses the main problem between God and man most directly and becomes, therefore, the sustaining source of all the other benefits of the gospel" (44). Therefore, justification is the heart of the gospel. But in order to answer the question of why justification is desirable, we ask what the highest good of the gospel is. Justification is desirable only because it brings us into glorious, soul-satisfying fellowship with God.*

15. Respond to the statement: "The gospel is a way to get people to heaven."

- **ANSWER.** *This statement is ambiguous. If it is understood to mean that the gospel is a way to get people to heaven, in which the God of heaven dwells in all his glory, then it is a good and right statement. So often, however, "heaven" is a vague concept that has no reference to the satisfying presence of God. Therefore, a better way to say it is, "The gospel is a way to get people to God" (47).*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 47–56

- ▷ start at "What Is the Supreme Good That Makes the Gospel Good News?"

## Day 4

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### GOD'S GLORY IN CHRIST

The following passage is, according to Piper, “the most important biblical text to make clear the point of [his] book,” (59) *God Is the Gospel*. The day’s study will focus almost exclusively on this passage.

#### 2 Corinthians 4:1–6

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup> For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

16. Underline the uses of the word “gospel” in this passage. Is it fair to assume that everything Paul says in this passage is said concerning the gospel?
  - **ANSWER.** Yes, it is legitimate to read the entire passage as Paul’s teaching on what the gospel is. The preaching of the gospel is the ministry that Paul has by the mercy of God (4:1); it is the central theme of God’s word (4:2) and synonymous with Paul’s “open statement of the truth” (4:2). Vv. 3–6 then describe Paul’s gospel ministry and explain why some respond positively and others don’t.

17. According to this passage, what is the gospel? How is it “seen”?

- **ANSWER.** *The gospel is a message in which the light of God’s glory is emitted. The gospel is “seen” when God removes the blindness of our minds, speaking (as it were) light into existence where only darkness had been. We apprehend the gospel by savoring the beauty of Jesus Christ in the proclamation of the word.*

The proclamation of the gospel is what Paul gave his whole life to. Or, rather, God called Paul and appointed him as a unique herald of the gospel to the Gentiles. Study these parallel passages that describe the ministry of the apostle Paul.

2 Corinthians 4:4

*<sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

2 Corinthians 4:6

*<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

Acts 26:16, 18

*<sup>16</sup> ... I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness ... <sup>18</sup> to open [the Gentiles’] eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God ...*

18. Mark any similarities you see between these passages. How does seeing these passages in parallel provide us with insight into their meaning?

This spiritual apprehension of glory is what conversion is, as we will study further in the next lesson.

- **ANSWER.** *Read together, it is clear that Paul’s ministry was one in which the supernatural power of God was at work. Though we were blinded to God’s glory, living under the power of sin and Satan, God opened our eyes—that is, the eyes of our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6)—so that we could see and know his glory. His glory is seen in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s divine son.*

*“We must see ‘the glory of God in the face of Christ.’ Why? Because that is what the gospel is. The gospel is not just historical events—Christ died and was buried and rose. Gospel is good news. And we do not see the decisive good in the good news if we do not see in the events the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Notice carefully the use of the word gospel in verse 4: It is the ‘gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.’ This is the gospel. The glory of Christ seen and savored in the work of redemption is the good news.*

*This is the highest and best and final good that makes all the other good things promised in the gospel good. Justification is good news because it makes us stand accepted by the one whose glory we want to see and savor above all things. Forgiveness is good news because it cancels all the sins that keep me from seeing and enjoying the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Removal of wrath and salvation from hell are good news because now in my escape from eternal misery I find eternal pleasure beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ. Eternal life is good news because this is eternal life, Jesus said, that they know me and him who sent me. And freedom from pain and sickness and conflict are good news because, in my freedom from pain, I am no longer distracted from the fullest enjoyment of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.*

*In other words, 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 6 tell us what the highest, best, ultimate good of the good news is: the glory of God in the face of Christ, that is, the glory of Christ who is the image of God.”<sup>20</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 59–67

▷ stop at “This Glory of Christ Is the Glory of God”

19. Piper (depending on Edwards) uses the analogy of tasting honey. To what does he compare this? What is the point of the analogy?

- **ANSWER.** *Just as there is a categorical difference between seeing honey and tasting it, or affirming things about honey and having direct experience of its sweetness, there is also a difference between understanding the facts of the gospel and seeing the beauty and excellency of Christ in it.*

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<sup>20</sup> John Piper, “What Makes the Good News Good?” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

20. According to Piper, Paul speaks of “Christ revealing his glory through the gospel” (65, italics added). Take notes on the significance of this statement.

· **ANSWER.** *2 Corinthians 4:4 speaks of the glory of a person: the Christ. This glory is most fully revealed in his death and resurrection. The glory of this person is mediated through the gospel message, now preserved in the Scriptures.*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 67–74

▷ start at “This Glory of Christ Is the Glory of God”

 INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT



In the Further Reading section of Day 1 is a basic presentation of the gospel. How does this presentation relate to what we've been studying in this lesson?

Compose your own brief summary of the gospel message in such a way that it could be communicated clearly and succinctly to someone who had little familiarity with Christianity. Be sure to include the substance of what we've studied in this lesson: God is the gospel.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Review the following questions in preparation for discussion. Record any lingering questions that you may have after completing the lesson.

1. Can you think of an example of the gospel being proclaimed in the wrong way?
2. Why might Piper's book be entitled *God Is the Gospel* and not *Christ Is the Gospel*?
3. Will what you have learned in this lesson change the way you present the gospel? Explain.
4. Your own question(s):

 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” available online
- ▷ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).



# A God-Centered Conversion

# 4

## Lesson Four

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

One of the most harmful teachings in America and around the world today is the so-called “free grace” teaching, also known as “once saved, always saved” or “easy believism.” Such teaching often distinguishes between receiving Jesus as Savior and receiving Jesus as Lord. The testimonies of this teaching’s advocates often sound like this:

*Near the age of fifteen I accepted Christ as my Savior. As I look back on my life, I can see He had powerful influence during my late teen years and early twenties. In my late twenties I began to be aware of the concept of Christ as Lord. As I investigated that concept and struggled with it, I realized that for Christ to be Lord, I had to submit every-thing to Him. In my early thirties I did just that. The concept of “lordship salvation” that you [Piper] support would mean that had I died at age twenty-two, that is, before Christ was Lord, I would not have gone to Heaven.<sup>21</sup>*

Although this lesson won’t directly address the “lordship salvation” controversy, it will define conversion biblically. We will argue that at conversion we trust in Jesus as our Savior and submit to him as our Lord and embrace him as the greatest Treasure of our life.

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<sup>21</sup> An unnamed minister as quoted by John Piper in “Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called ‘Lordship Salvation,’” an article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ identify why conversion entails delight in God
- ▷ explain how repentance or contrition relates to delight in God
- ▷ communicate the true nature of saving faith



Again, it will probably be appropriate in the discussion of this lesson to emphasize the humble, brokenhearted, and imperfect nature of our joy. If this is not clearly taught, your students may wonder if they are saved or whether the God-centered life is possible, even with the grace of God. Piper is not teaching perfectionism.

An analogy might be helpful at this point. In a marriage, a husband or wife can find deep delight in their beloved spouse. And yet, everyone who is married knows how easy it is to betray their spouse in word, thought, or deed. A passing, lustful glance, an unholy fantasy entertained even for a few seconds, a word spoken in anger, a marital dullness of affections—each married person betrays their spouse. Now does the wandering of our heart mean that we don't love the one to whom we're married? No. Do our occasional mental flirtations mean that our joy in the beloved is altogether phony? No. But the love in marriage is only genuine if these sins against our spouse grieve us for how they reveal a lack of delight in the one in whom we delight. The same is true in our relationship with God. The contrition we feel for our sin in the first moment of belief and the godly sorrow that remains with us throughout our life ought to be a grief over our lack of joy in God. The persistent presence of this brokenhearted joy in the midst of remaining sin is not a sign of our lack of relationship with God; rather, it is an indication that he has truly awakened us to his own beauty and infinite worth.





## Day 1

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### IS JESUS YOUR TREASURE?

As we will read later in this lesson, John Piper doesn't think that the "breezy, light-hearted religious atmosphere of recent generations" supports the kind of seriousness and urgency that is needed when considering the warnings of Scripture or the nature of true conversion.

The doctrine of conversion, however, demands our attention. Conversion is a matter of life and death—*everlasting* life and everlasting death. Two passages will put us in the right frame of mind for studying the doctrine of conversion.

Matthew 7:13–14

*<sup>13</sup> Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

2 Thessalonians 2:9–14

*<sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. <sup>13</sup> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. <sup>14</sup> To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1. Why is it important to study the nature of conversion?

- **ANSWER.** *The importance of the doctrine of conversion simply follows from the reality that not all will be saved. Since only some are converted and only the converted will “obtain the glory of Christ,” we must understand this doctrine. In addition, we will see later in this lesson that it is possible to be deceived about one’s own conversion.*

Paul often talks about his own experience of the mercy of God.

Philippians 3:3–8

<sup>3</sup> For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup> though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. <sup>7</sup> But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ...

2. Does this passage describe Paul’s conversion or an act subsequent to his conversion?

Paul was a Christian Hedonist!

- **ANSWER.** *Counting all things as loss for the sake of Christ describes the Christian’s life and conversion. Paul had certain distinctives that he thought would commend him to God. When confronted by Christ, he counted (past tense) these things as loss so that he could receive the righteousness of faith (3:9). But as a believer in Christ he continues to “count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”*

Acts 16:31

<sup>31</sup> Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ...

Psalms 37:4

<sup>4</sup> Delight yourself in the LORD ...

3. How do these two commands relate to one another?

- **ANSWER.** *These commands are both describing the activity of the soul in conversion (and the life of faith). True belief is an apprehension of the beauty, sweetness, and worthiness of God. It is impossible to truly believe in God without delighting in him.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 53–55

▷ stop at “Six Crucial Truths to Summarize Our Need and God’s Provision”

4. What does the question “Do you receive Jesus as your Treasure?” get at that the questions “Do you believe in Jesus?” or “Is Jesus your Lord and Savior?” might not get at?

- **ANSWER.** *Asking whether Jesus is someone’s Treasure penetrates to the crucial reality of whether there is delight in their heart for God. The second and third questions (above) have unfortunately lost much of their meaning in our nominal Christian culture and are no longer as incisive as the first question.*

5. John Piper asserts: “Unless a man be born again *into a Christian Hedonist* he cannot see the kingdom of God” (55). Do you think this is an overstatement? Why or why not?

- **ANSWER.** *This is not an overstatement if one understands that John Piper is simply emphasizing that true faith embraces God as more satisfying than anything else. All truly converted Christians are Christian Hedonists, whether or not they are familiar with that language or understand its meaning.*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 63–70

▷ start at “What is Conversion?”

▷ stop at “The Creation of a Christian Hedonist”

This important section emphasizes God’s sovereign work in conversion.

## Day 2

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### FINDING HIDDEN TREASURE

We have argued that embracing Jesus as Treasure is essential to conversion. Here is a little gem of a parable which teaches this truth.

Matthew 13:44

*44 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.*

6. Why would a man be joyful to sell all that he has in order to buy the field?
  - **ANSWER.** *He would be joyful if what was in the field was worth more than all he had. He would be exchanging a lesser treasure for a much greater treasure and the gain would make him happy.*
  
7. Rewrite this parable, using different imagery, to make the same central point.
  - **ANSWER.** *Answers May Vary: [Example] The kingdom of heaven is like a hidden freshwater spring in a desert country. A man would sell hundreds of acres of sand to purchase the small plot in which the spring was concealed.*

*“In the Old Testament, to be converted from worldliness to godliness was to discover the truth of Psalm 16:11: ‘You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.’ In the New Testament, conversion meant discovering that Jesus was a treasure of such surpassing worth that joy would enable a new disciple to leave everything and follow him.”<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Taken from *When I Don't Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp. #25. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

John 3:18–20

*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*

8. What prevents people from coming to the light? What does this imply about the nature of conversion?

· **ANSWER.** *People do not come to the light because they hate the light and love the darkness. This perverted misplacement of affections is unbelief (v. 18) and results in a fear of exposure (v. 20). Therefore, if people would come to the light they must have a change in their affections so that they love the light.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 70–74

▷ start at “The Creation of a Christian Hedonist”

9. How could you use the parable of Matthew 13:44 to respond to someone who asked, “Why should I become a Christian?”

· **ANSWER.** *One could say to that person that having God as their Savior, friend and king was more valuable than any earthly treasure, and that they should “sell everything” in order to become a Christian for their own everlasting joy.*

10. Summarize the relationship Piper describes between joy and faith.

· **ANSWER.** *The relationship can be described in different ways: joy in God is the “new taste” that God creates that precedes faith; faith is the pursuit of joy in whatever we think will satisfy; and joy is the fruit of our daily faith.*

## Day 3

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### CHRIST-EXALTING CONTRITION

Isn't repentance necessary in conversion? How does repentance relate to the God-awakened joy that we've been studying and which we are claiming is essential to conversion?

To start, think about this: people are grieving in hell. Jesus describes hell as a place of intense sorrow and mourning and regret—a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42, two verses before Matthew 13:44!). The regret of those in hell, however, does not please God. But why? What distinguishes their regret from the Christian's repentance?

Luke 5:1–10

<sup>1</sup> On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, <sup>2</sup> and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. <sup>4</sup> And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” <sup>9</sup> For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, <sup>10</sup> and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”

11. Why does Peter respond the way he does in verse 8?

- **ANSWER.** *It appears as if Simon Peter is humbled when he sees the mighty and gracious provision of Jesus in response to the disciples' skepticism. This display of power and grace exposes Peter's lack of trust. Peter's response, however, would not make sense if he did not believe that Jesus was worthy of total devotion. To be called on to follow Jesus, therefore, would have been an unexpected joy.*

Now read Piper's commentary on this episode:

*“Peter’s response was remarkable, unlike our modern self-esteeming response to grace. ... What is remarkable here is that a miracle of grace, not a word of judgment, broke Peter’s heart and brought him to contrite repentance.*

*... Now why is that? Genuine evangelical contrition—as opposed to legalistic, fearful sadness simply owing to threats—is a sorrow for not having holiness.*

*... The only true sorrow for not having holiness comes from a love for holiness, not just from a fear of the consequences of not having it. Or a more precise way to say it is this: true remorse over not having holiness is remorse over not enjoying God and living by the impulses of that joy. To cry over the punishment one is about to receive for wrongdoing is no sign of hating wrong but only hating pain. For crying and contrition to be real and evangelical, it must come from the brokenhearted feelings you have for lacking a life of joy in God, not just from the fearful feelings of being threatened with pain.*

*But now think what this means. ... If crying over something you don’t have is going to show the preciousness of that ‘something’ in itself, then you must really have some delight in it. And the more you delight in it, the more you feel distressed over not having it. This means that true evangelical contrition, true repentance, must be preceded by a falling in love with the all-satisfying God. To weep at not having holiness, you must long for holiness as a precious experience and reflection of God. To weep over not possessing it, it must be attractive to you for what it really is.*

*So you see how strange this seems at first: God and His way of holiness must become your joy before you can weep over not having them. You must fall in love before estrangement truly hurts. We must taste the pleasure of knowing God before we will experience the God-honoring pain of remorse for sin.”<sup>23</sup>*

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23 John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002) 123–124.

12. Summarize Piper's contention in these paragraphs.

- **ANSWER.** *Piper is contending that contrition that honors God must have a prior pleasure in God. If our repentance is devoid of delight in God, then we are, in fact, treasuring something else (e.g., a lack of pain) more than God. Repenting as a Christian Hedonist is necessary in order to honor God!*

We will examine another passage which addresses the nature of God-centered repentance:

2 Corinthians 7:6–11

*<sup>6</sup> But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, <sup>7</sup> and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. <sup>8</sup> For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. <sup>9</sup> As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. <sup>10</sup> For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup> For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.*

A critical question to ask ourselves is whether our repentance is prompted by godly grief or whether we only have an ungodly regret that is prompted by worldly grief.

*“The opposite of godly remorse is not always remorselessness. The powers of darkness in the world are much more subtle than that. There is a grief, a regret, a remorse which is ‘of the world’ and not ‘according to God.’ You can feel sorry for something in a worldly way which leads to death. So what we need to do is distinguish godly regret from worldly regret.*

*I would suggest two ways to distinguish them.*

1. *Worldly regret is when you feel sorry for something you did because it starts to backfire on you and leads to humiliation or punishment. It's the reflex of a proud or fearful ego. Pride will always regret making a fool of itself. And fear will always regret acts that jeopardize comfort and safety. So feeling sorry for something we have done is in itself no sign of virtue. But godly regret is the reflex of a conscience that has wounded God's ego, not its own. Godly regret grieves that God's name has come into disrepute. The focus of godly regret is God.*
2. *A second way to distinguish worldly regret from godly regret is that godly regret is owing to God's Word putting its finger on sin in our lives. Worldly regret is owing not to God's Word but to the attitudes of men whose praise we don't want to lose. We can feel extremely sorry for something we have done if we detect that the people around us think it is stupid or silly or reprehensible. The word of man not God becomes the criterion of guilt.*

*So in summary, godly grief, or godly regret, is the uncomfortable feeling of guilt when the Word of God shows you that what you've done is sin and thus has brought reproach on God's name. (Of course, if other people have been hurt by your sin, godly regret will want to redress the wrong and so remove the reproach upon God's honor.) Godly regret is the regret of a God-saturated heart, not a world-saturated heart.”<sup>24</sup>*

13. How does godly grief relate to joy?

- **ANSWER.** *It is clear that worldly grief flows from a heart that is swollen with pride or esteems the praise of man. It mourns the loss of these worldly things because its delight is in them. Godly grief, then, delights in God and not the world. We are hurt when God's reputation is smeared only when we delight in God's glory.*

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24 John Piper, “The Good End of Godly Regret,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

*“Being sorrowful as God intended is feeling the deep grief that comes from knowing that our attitudes and actions have harmed our relationship with God. ‘Godly sorrow’ feels bad because it is missing out on God.*

*... Worldly sorrow is the grief that comes about because one’s actions result in missing out on something the world has to offer. Worldly sorrow feels bad because it wants more of the world.”<sup>25</sup>*

It is clear from the ministry of Paul that sorrow and joy could continuously coexist. The one does not cancel out the other:

2 Corinthians 6:4, 10

*<sup>4</sup> ... as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: ... <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing ...*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 105–109, 111–112

- ▷ stop at “What Is Disinterested Love? Pleasure in God Himself”
- ▷ start at “Anti-Triumphalism: Sorrowful Yet Always Rejoicing”
- ▷ stop at “Leaving Satan Alive: The Price of Showing Christ Precious”

14. Imagine a scenario in which contrition did not arise from delight in God. Sketch such a scenario below. Why wouldn’t this kind of contrition be pleasing to God?

- **ANSWER.** *Answers May Vary: [Example] Suppose a man is caught cheating on his wife. It would be possible for him to feel sorrow for many reasons: he doesn’t want the shame of being known as an adulterer; exposing the affair might make his children upset; he could lose his place of leadership in the local church; he won’t be able to enjoy the secret affair anymore. None of these reasons proves that the man’s sorrow goes beyond worldly grief. An unbeliever could feel all of these things. But until the man acknowledges the way in which he has sinned against God and forfeited joy in God, God will not be honored.*

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<sup>25</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 312.

15. Why might the joy of a Christian be a “humble brokenhearted joy” (112)?

- **ANSWER.** *When we experience joy in God, we do so with an awareness of our own unworthiness. Though we have done everything possible to deserve God’s wrath and displeasure, he lavishes his love and joy upon us. This humbles us. And as we continue to live the Christian life we see the sin that remains in us and the sin of others. Since our sin belittles God, it causes us pain of heart, even while we rejoice in our salvation.*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 110–111, 113–115

- ▷ start at “What Is Disinterested Love? Pleasure in God Himself”
- ▷ stop at “Anti-Triumphalism: Sorrowful Yet Always Rejoicing”
- ▷ start at “Leaving Satan Alive: The Price of Showing Christ Precious”

## Day 4

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### BELIEVING AS EMBRACING

Thus far in this lesson we've studied the nature of conversion and the place of God-centered repentance. We've argued that conversion is an embracing of Jesus as our Treasure. In the study for today we will argue for this assertion from one additional angle: the nature of saving faith. And we will begin by examining pseudo-faith and how it differs from genuine faith.

Matthew 7:21–23

*<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."*

James 2:14–19

*<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? <sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*

16. What characterizes the faith of these “workers of lawlessness” and demons? How must saving faith be different?

· **ANSWER.** *Pseudo-faith can do many mighty works, even in the name of Jesus, and believe true things of God. But genuine, saving faith must go beyond mental assent to the truth. Saving faith delights in God and overflows in acts of love.*

Here is how the author to the Hebrews defines genuine faith.

Hebrews 11:6

<sup>6</sup> *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

17. How is faith described by this verse?

- **ANSWER.** *Faith is described as the belief that God exists and rewards those who seek him. Faith is treasure-seeking!*

*“God is pleased by us when two things about him are reflected in our relation to him. One: that he is real; and the other: that he is rewarding.*

*Behind these two assertions about God are two great facts:*

1. *God exists absolutely. He did not come into being and will never go out of being. He is not becoming or growing or changing. He said, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). That is his name. He absolutely is. Therefore, he is pleased when this absolute existence is known and embraced. He is pleased when what he is is reflected in our lives.*
2. *Behind the assertion that God is rewarding is the fact that God is so full and so completely self-sufficient that he overflows. Rather than needing our service, he is like a never-ending Spring of life and energy and joy and beauty and goodness and power. Therefore it pleases God when we come to him in a way that affirms this and delights in it—when we come to him as a Rewarder.*

*Now the writer of Hebrews simply asserts that this is what faith does: faith comes to God with the confidence that he is, and faith comes with the confidence that God will be a generous Giver. He is not arguing that faith is this way because he finds it defined in the Old Testament stories. He is saying: given the absolute reality of God’s being and God’s fullness, this is what faith has to be. This is the end of the argument. This is the bottom of the reasoning.*

*We could say it like this: what pleases God is that our hearts and minds display God’s being and God’s beauty. That we display God’s existence and his excellence. That we display how real he is and how rewarding he is. This is what pleases God, and this is faith.”<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> John Piper, “Without Faith It Is Impossible to Please God,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

18. Paraphrase Hebrews 11:6 in such a way that a five-year-old child could understand it.

- **ANSWER.** *It is impossible for us to please God without coming to him with an open hand, saying “Please give to me Daddy.”*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 195–207

The required reading for today jumps into the middle of *Future Grace*. Hopefully, this chapter will be understandable without having read the beginning of the book. We will dive into the main argument of *Future Grace* in the next lesson.

19. According to Piper, what distinguishes saving faith from hypocritical delusion or the “faith” of demons?

- **ANSWER.** *What hypocrites and demons lack is not intellectual understanding, but a “satisfaction” in God. Saving faith enables us to “apprehend and embrace spiritual beauty” (206). Therefore, in order to be truly converted, exhibiting saving faith, a person must delight in God. Conversion is the creation of a Christian Hedonist!*

20. Why is it better to say that faith is being satisfied with all that God will be for us in Jesus?

- **ANSWER.** *As Piper argues in the rest of this book, faith is future-oriented. It is an act of depending on God for what he will be for us “in the next moment, and in the next month, and in the endless ages of eternity” (206). When we make decisions about how to live now, we are making those decisions based upon what we anticipate the outcome of those decisions will be. And as we’ve already seen, we choose to do whatever we think will bring us the greatest pleasure.*



Write a letter to a friend (real or imagined) who, as far as you can tell, professes to believe in Jesus but shows no evidence of a true conversion. Or, write a letter to someone who claims that Jesus is their Savior, but hasn't "submitted to Jesus as their Lord" or "embraced Jesus as their Treasure." Share in your letter what you've learned in this lesson. Be sure to compose the letter in a winsome and tactful way (not judging the heart; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:3–5), but in a way that clearly explains the truth. If the Lord prompts you, give this letter to your friend if you are specifically writing to someone.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Review the following questions in preparation for discussion. Record any lingering questions that you may have after completing the lesson.

1. Which comes first, the creation of a new spiritual taste (regeneration) or the act of repentance and belief (faith)? Why is this important to discern?
2. How might false teaching about the nature of conversion and saving faith be harmful to the church?
3. Is it possible to be a Christian Hedonist without knowing it?
4. Your own question(s):



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- ▷ John Piper, “Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called ‘Lordship Salvation,’” an article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).



# A God-Centered Faith

# 5

## Lesson Five

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most helpful illustrations in John Piper’s preaching and teaching ministry is of the glory of God as the sun at the center of our life:

*I have a picture in my mind of the majesty of Christ like the sun at the center of the solar system of your life. The massive sun, 333,000 times the mass of the earth, holds all the planets in orbit, even little Pluto, 3.6 billion miles away.*

*So it is with the supremacy of Christ in your life. All the planets of your life—your sexuality and desires, your commitments and beliefs, your aspirations and dreams, your attitudes and convictions, your habits and disciplines, your solitude and relationships, your labor and leisure, your thinking and feeling—all the planets of your life are held in orbit by the greatness and gravity and blazing brightness of the supremacy of Jesus Christ at the center of your life. And if he ceases to be the bright, blazing, satisfying beauty at the center of your life, the planets will fly into confusion, and a hundred things will be out of control, and sooner or later they will crash into destruction.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>27</sup> John Piper, “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ, Part 2,” a conference message at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

We've argued in previous lessons that God's glory is the sun at the center of our solar system because it is at the blazing center of God's affections and purposes. We strive to be God-centered because God is God-centered. The planets of our lives come into their proper orbital tracks only as we apprehend the glory of the sun, bursting with light. This first happens at the moment of conversion, when we believe in the God-centered gospel.

But once the sun is at the blazing center of our lives, it remains there and our planets continue to revolve around it. So the questions that this lesson will ask are these: "How are we to keep, by God's grace, Jesus at the center? How do we keep our planets from flying out of control and colliding? How do we live the God-centered life?"

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain what is meant by the phrase "living by faith in future grace"
- ▷ define the "debtor's ethic" that Christians can adopt toward God and identify the biblical motivation for obedience
- ▷ explain the proper relationship between gratitude and faith, bygone grace and future grace



The essential project of Piper’s book, *Future Grace*, is well summarized in the two quotations that were cited in the answer to Question 4. We will reproduce them here again:

*“At the heart of the book is the conviction that the promises of future grace are the keys to Christ-like Christian living. The hand that turns the key is faith, and the life that results is called living by faith in future grace.” (5)*

*“This amazingly effectual faith has the power it does because it looks to the future and embraces the promises of God as more satisfying than the promises of sin.” (8)*

Here is an illustration of the dynamics of temptation that could easily be transferred to our battle with any sin (good for use with 4):

*Suppose that you are approaching the checkout line in your local grocery store. As you wheel your cart toward the end of the line, you notice that there is a scantily clad woman or man in a provocative posture on the front of a magazine. Your heart is immediately drawn to take that magazine off the shelf and peek inside. No one you know seems to be around. You can certainly snatch a look without anyone noticing. When the temptation to lust hits you, what will you do?*

*At that moment, you must realize that sin is making you a promise for satisfaction: “Just take a quick look at that magazine (or turn over that sexy cover image in your mind) and it will feel real good. It will bring you pleasure.” What will counteract sin’s promise? What will enable you to live in purity, guard your eyes and heart from evil, and control your body in holiness and honor (1 Thessalonians 4:4)? The lie of the flesh can only be broken in that moment by the promise of a superior pleasure. You must say to yourself: “God has created my body. He knows what will bring me true and lasting joy. And he has told me that joy is to be found in purity and not in indulging sexual fantasies. Therefore, I’m going to trust that he can provide me with what my soul is craving.”*

Now, it must be said that the lustful pleasure of savoring a sexy image could be counteracted with something else. You could say at the moment of temptation: “I don’t want to take the risk of being seen by someone I know” or “My acceptance with God is based upon my ability to resist now”

or “I’ll wait until I can look at pornography at home on the internet.” These motivations might prohibit you from considering the magazine cover, but they will not bring glory to God and they certainly won’t support a lifelong pursuit of purity. Only by trusting in the future grace of God will you honor him and put to death the deeds of the body.

It should also be noted that the Bible never teaches us to say, “God has given so much to me; therefore, out of gratitude for what he has done, I will not do this thing—I will not look at this magazine.” Thankfulness for past grace should strengthen our trust in God to provide for us in the future, but it is not meant to motivate our obedience.

It is practical examples, such as the one given above, that usually help people understand what it means to live by faith in future grace. We recommend that you read some of Piper’s “Applying the Purifying Power” chapters in *Future Grace* in your preparation so that you can effectively communicate and illustrate the dynamic of biblical faith.

Also, chapters 7 and 8 are key chapters in *Future Grace*. We recommend that you familiarize yourself with the content of these chapters so that you are better prepared to explain the logic of living by faith in future grace. Especially notice how the cross of Christ functions as basis upon which God can be gracious to us and how it is the great guarantee for future grace.



## Day 1

### RIGHT THINKING, RIGHT LIVING

An implicit assumption of this curriculum is that right theology is necessary for right living. If we want to live in a God-centered way, we must think in a God-centered and biblically faithful way. One of the clearest expressions of this principle is the book of Proverbs.

Throughout the book of Proverbs, there is an emphasis on the precious value and practical benefit of wisdom (right thinking). Wisdom is essential for living in a way that is pleasing to God (right living).

In order to introduce the concept of living by faith in future grace, we will attempt to present the dynamics of sin and obedience through an examination of certain verses in two chapters of Proverbs. Hopefully you will see by the end of this day's study how the life that Proverbs commends is a life of living by faith in future grace.

#### Proverbs 2:11–15

<sup>11</sup> Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, <sup>12</sup> delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, <sup>13</sup> who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, <sup>14</sup> who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, <sup>15</sup> men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

1. According to this passage, why do people sin? What motivates them?

- **ANSWER.** Verse 14 asserts that evil men “rejoice” in doing evil and “delight” in it; therefore, we can say that people choose sin for the pleasure it affords. No one ever sins unwillingly; they sin because they think by sinning that they will profit in some way. This is a clear inference from the premise that “all men seek happiness”—whether in doing what is good or what is evil.

Wisdom is offered in the book of Proverbs as the way in which a person may guard themselves from sin.

#### Proverbs 5:1–14

<sup>1</sup> My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, <sup>2</sup> that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge. <sup>3</sup> For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, <sup>4</sup> but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. <sup>5</sup> Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol; <sup>6</sup> she does not ponder the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it. <sup>7</sup> And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. <sup>8</sup> Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, <sup>9</sup> lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, <sup>10</sup> lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner, <sup>11</sup> and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, <sup>12</sup> and you say, “How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof!” <sup>13</sup> I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. <sup>14</sup> I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.”

2. According to this passage, how does wisdom keep a person from an adulterer?

- **ANSWER.** *Wisdom exposes adultery for what it truly is: a lie. Though the “forbidden woman” appears to provide satisfaction, wisdom sees that adultery only leads to death, regret, ruin, and dissatisfaction. Sin may provide temporary pleasure, but ultimately it is a bitter illusion. Knowing that sin’s wages are death and regret should keep us far from it.*

Wisdom, however, does not merely provide us with “negative” incentives for (or warnings against) pursuing sin. Wisdom also provides “positive” incentives for righteousness. Continue reading the next verses in the context of Proverbs 5.

Proverbs 5:15–19

<sup>15</sup> Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. <sup>16</sup> Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? <sup>17</sup> Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. <sup>18</sup> Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, <sup>19</sup> a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.

3. What provocative counsel does wisdom offer? How is this meant to counter the allure of sin?
  - **ANSWER.** *As we've seen, sin promises pleasure; that is why people pursue it. But in this passage, wisdom offers the superior pleasure of marital fidelity. Wisdom does not teach us to altogether deny the pursuit of pleasure; rather wisdom directs us where to find superior and lasting pleasure!*

The dynamic involved in denying sin and pursuing righteousness that we've seen in Proverbs 5 is a pattern found throughout the Bible. This dynamic does not concern human-to-human faithfulness alone. Being faithful to a spouse is often compared to the fidelity we ought to have in our relationship with God. Conversely, sin against God is often portrayed as spiritual adultery.

Isaiah 54:5

<sup>5</sup> For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

Jeremiah 3:20

<sup>20</sup> Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD.

Can the strategy for human, marital faithfulness that we've seen in Proverbs 5 be applied successfully to our relationship with God, so that we are wise and faithful to him?

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 1–9

▷ stop at “Why Does the Book Have Thirty–One Chapters?”

4. According to Piper’s introduction, what is “at the heart” of this book?

- **ANSWER.** *To quote Piper, “At the heart of the book is the conviction that the promises of future grace are the keys to Christlike Christian living. The hand that turns the key is faith, and the life that results is called living by faith in future grace” (5). This is supplemented by what he says later, “This amazingly effectual faith has the power it does because it looks to the future and embraces the promises of God as more satisfying than the promises of sin” (8).*

See Teaching Notes for recommendations for discussion on fighting sin.

5. Think of a particular sin with which you are struggling. How might you apply Chalmers’ counsel and displace the old, sinful affection in your heart with a more worthy attachment?

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary.*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 9–15

- ▷ start at “Why Does the Book Have Thirty–One Chapters?”

## Day 2

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### SHOULD GRATITUDE MOTIVATE OBEDIENCE?

When asked what should motivate our obedience to God, not many would answer “pleasure.” The more likely response is “gratitude.” But does the Bible offer gratitude as a motivation for obedience? Or does the Bible fault those who fail to obey with a failure to be grateful enough?

Psalm 78:12–22

*<sup>12</sup> In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. <sup>13</sup> He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. <sup>14</sup> In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. <sup>15</sup> He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. <sup>16</sup> He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers. <sup>17</sup> Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. <sup>18</sup> They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. <sup>19</sup> They spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness? <sup>20</sup> He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?” <sup>21</sup> Therefore, when the LORD heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, <sup>22</sup> because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power.*

6. According to these verses, what was Israel’s failure?

- **ANSWER.** *At the root of Israel’s sin was a lack of belief and a failure to trust in God’s saving power (v. 22). It was not wrong for the people to ask God to feed them. But the people craved the food, putting their own physical desires above their love for God. Israel should have trusted in God to provide what they needed and should have delighted in his presence with them.*

The trap in obeying out of gratitude is that it is often (inevitably?) accompanied by an unbiblical sense of indebtedness to God. As we will see in the reading assignment for today, such a “debtor’s ethic” suggests that we must “pay back” to God the “debt” we owe.

Psalm 50:8–15

<sup>8</sup> Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. <sup>9</sup> I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. <sup>10</sup> For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. <sup>11</sup> I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. <sup>12</sup> If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. <sup>13</sup> Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? <sup>14</sup> Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, <sup>15</sup> and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

7. Draw a line that divides the two primary sections within these verses. What is the main idea in the first section? What is the main idea in the second section?

- **ANSWER.** *First section (vv. 8–13): God will not accept a gift from us that implies that he is not self-sufficient or in any way “needs” us. Second section (vv. 14–15): God will accept our thanksgiving and praise, and he desires to show his sufficiency by delivering us from trouble.*

8. Using Psalm 50:15, respond to the popular statement. “God helps those who help themselves.”

- **ANSWER.** *Psalm 50:15 turns this statement on its head. Psalm 50:15 says, in effect, that God will help those who can’t help themselves, and that he only asks us to glorify him for his resourcefulness when we are in need. Faith does not give to God what he lacks; faith is continually calling on God to supply what we lack.*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 29–32, 44–47

- ▷ stop at “The Fear of the Lord and Faith in *Future Grace*”
- ▷ start at “When Gratitude Malfunctions”

9. Which of the following statements could represent the debtor’s ethic? Select all possible answers.
- a) God has given us so much, therefore we should give him everything we have.
  - b) Everything we have belongs to God.
  - c) We will spend eternity thanking God for what he has done for us.
  - d) To fight sin you should concentrate on being thankful for the cross.
10. Write your own brief conversation between “gratitude” and “faith” about grace:

· **ANSWER.** (as an example)

*Gratitude:* “Oh, I exult in the benefits of God’s grace. I want more!”

*Faith:* “God has promised that if I walk in obedience, he will give me more grace.”

*Gratitude:* “Then please obey because God’s grace has never failed to satisfy.”

*Faith:* “Your reassurance has strengthened me to trust God for more.”

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 33–44

- ▷ start at “The Fear of the Lord and Faith in *Future Grace*”
- ▷ stop at “When Gratitude Malfunctions”

## Day 3

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### GOD-CENTERED FAITH IN ACTION

What we've studied thus far may be difficult to comprehend since it's mostly been in the realm of theory. In this lesson, we will do extensive work on one passage of Scripture, seeking to understand the concept of living by faith in future grace by seeing it applied to an everyday struggle. The passage we'll study is well-known and loved by many.

Matthew 6:25–34

*<sup>25</sup> Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

11. In this passage, what sin is Jesus teaching his disciples about? Underline evidence of your answer.

• **ANSWER.** *It is clear that Jesus is teaching his disciples about the sin of anxiety. What is interesting, however, is that Jesus seems to attribute their anxiety to a lack of faith (v. 30).*

12. How does Jesus instruct his disciples to battle against this sin?

- **ANSWER.** *His disciples are to battle against anxiety by learning about the character of God and clinging to the promises of God. God cares for his people, will abundantly provide for them, and knows their needs. Jesus promises that God will supply physical necessities for those who seek the kingdom. Anxiety accomplishes nothing profitable.*

*“The life of faith is a continuous experience of ‘comparison shopping’ in which we are ‘buying’ with our attitudes and actions that which we think will really make us happy. The good news in obeying the commandment ‘Thou shall not covet’ is that in doing so we will not be disappointed, since God is of more value than anything this world has to offer. This is why the fear of God, reflected in faith and manifested in obedience to his commands, is the beginning of wisdom (Genesis 22:12; Psalm 1; 2:1–22; 119; Proverbs 1:7). Given who God is and the magnitude of his promises, Jesus is right: seeking God first and serving him alone is the only ‘smart’ thing to do (Matthew 6:19–20; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 12:32–34).”<sup>28</sup>*

13. Why might the label “living by faith in future grace” be an appropriate label for the lifestyle Jesus commends in Matthew 6:25–32?

- **ANSWER.** *Jesus is calling on his disciples to trust in the future provision of God. That trust will free them from a life of sinful anxiety. It is therefore a life of faith (trust) in God’s future grace (provision).*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 51–59

▷ start at “The Associates of Anxiety”

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<sup>28</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 102.

14. According to Piper, what is the root of anxiety? Is this the root of all sins?

- **ANSWER.** *The root of anxiety is unbelief. Unbelief is the underlying cancer that causes a number of symptoms, including anxiety. Though Piper doesn't indicate it at this point, the chapter seems to imply that unbelief is the root of all sins since the battle against sin is always a battle for faith.*

15. What are the two great "faith-builders"? Why are both necessary?

- **ANSWER.** *The two great faith-builders are the Word of God (and especially the promises of God) and the help of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, the Word cannot effectively do its work. And the Spirit delights to work through the Word of God. We should not expect the Spirit's help if we are not relying on the Word.*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 49–51

- ▷ stop at "The Associates of Anxiety"

## Day 4

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### THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE GOSPEL

In this day's study, we want to tie the gospel into the life of God-centered faith that we've been propounding. Christians would readily agree that a person is saved by believing the gospel. But is it accurate to say that a person is sanctified by believing the gospel? Does the gospel have anything to do with the believer's ongoing life of obedience?

In Lesson 3, we studied 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 and argued that the passage concerned the nature of Paul's gospel. The following verses immediately precede 2 Corinthians 4. This entire section in 2 Corinthians concerns Paul's new-covenant, gospel ministry.

2 Corinthians 3:14–18

*<sup>14</sup> But [the Israelites'] minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

16. What does this passage teach about conversion? What does this passage teach about sanctification?

- **ANSWER.** *This passage and the following verses in 2 Corinthians 4 depict conversion as the removal of the veil that blinds us to the glory of God. Beholding the glory of God is what happens at the moment of our conversion. But as we continue to behold God's glory, we are transformed (sanctified) and become more like God.*

17. What does your answer to the previous question have to do with the gospel? How is the gospel related to sanctification?

- **ANSWER.** *We have argued in Lesson 3 that the glory of God seen by a forgiven sinner is the chief good of the gospel. And, according to 2 Corinthians 3:14–18, this spiritual sight converts and transforms us. So, continued belief in the gospel is the means by which we are transformed.*

The transformative element to believing in the gospel is perhaps most clearly seen in Romans 8:32, which Piper has called “the most precious verse in the Bible to me.”<sup>29</sup> Truly believing in the promise of Romans 8:32 will radically affect your life!

Romans 8:31–32

<sup>31</sup> *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

<sup>32</sup> *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

18. What is the logic of Romans 8:32?

- **ANSWER.** *If God did not spare his own Son, then he certainly won’t “spare” from giving us all things together with Christ. (The argument is from a greater to a lesser.) The past grace of the cross gives us rock-solid assurance of future grace!*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 165–169

▷ stop at “Now Let Us Pray and Sacrifice and Sing”

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29 Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.111, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

19. The first part of this section (pages 165–168, ending at “The Transforming Power of the Glory of Christ in the Gospel”) summarizes much of the content and argument of the book. Summarize this section in a few sentences.
- **ANSWER.** *The best and final good of the gospel, though little discussed, is God himself. Without an enjoyment of the glory of God, the gospel is not good news. Therefore, in giving himself to us, God is supremely loving. And giving God to others—often through suffering—is how we truly love them.*
20. How would you apply your answer to the previous question to the pursuit of sanctification? How does *God Is the Gospel* relate to *Future Grace*?
- **ANSWER.** *Seeing and savoring the glory of God is not only the final good of the gospel but also the means by which we are changed. Therefore, the fight of faith (sanctification) is a fight to see and savor the final good of the gospel: God. Embracing God as our treasure is how we become Christians and is how we live as Christians. God’s gift of himself is the ultimate and foundational future grace.*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 169–179

- ▷ start at “Now Let Us Pray and Sacrifice and Sing”



## INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

The integrative assignment for this lesson is particularly important. Understanding the connections between the three Piper textbooks will lay the groundwork for the rest of this course and, hopefully, for a life of God-centered living. First ensure that your students understand the thrust of *Future Grace* in its own right. But then move toward a clear synthesis between the theologies of these three books.

Having been exposed now to the basic argument of all three textbooks (*Desiring God*, *God Is the Gospel*, and *Future Grace*), how would you weave their messages into one coherent theology? How would you relate the following assertions?

- ▷ God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.
- ▷ The best and final good of the gospel is God himself.
- ▷ Christ-like Christian living is living a life of faith in future grace.

Record your reflections below.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ See especially chapters 7 and 8 of John Piper, *Future Grace*.
- ▷ Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).
- ▷ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, Rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).
- ▷ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006).

# God-Centered Worship

# 6

## Lesson Six

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### § INTRODUCTION

John Piper relays an interesting (but sad) commentary on worship from an unbeliever:

*Worship is an aspect of religion that I always found difficult to understand. Suppose we postulate an omnipotent being who, for reasons inscrutable to us, decided to create something other than himself. Why should he ... expect us to worship him? We didn't ask to be created. Our lives are often troubled. We know that human tyrants, puffed up with pride, crave adulation and homage. But a morally perfect God would surely have no character defects. So why are all those people on their knees every Sunday?<sup>30</sup>*

These are excellent questions and Christians should have an answer!

### § LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain what it means to worship “in spirit”
- ▷ identify the role of the emotions in worship
- ▷ defend the statement that “worship is an end in itself”

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<sup>30</sup> As quoted in John Piper, “An Open Letter to Michael Prowse,” an online article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).





Lesson 6 defines and describes true worship. In your preparation for this lesson, don't miss the conclusion of Chapter 3 in *Desiring God* (listed as Further Reading on Day 4 for the students). Your responsibility as the instructor of this course is well stated by Jonathan Edwards, as quoted on page 103:

*"I should think myself in the way of my duty, to raise the affections of my hearers as high as I possibly can, provided they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with."*

Chapter 7 of *Let the Nations Be Glad*, entitled "The Inner Simplicity and Outer Freedom of Worldwide Worship," is an excellent treatment of the nature of New Testament worship. Though we recommend that you read the chapter in full if you can, here is the thrust of the chapter:

*My thesis is that worship in the New Testament has moved toward something radically simple and inward, with manifold external expressions in life and liturgy. ... In short, what we find in the New Testament is an utterly stunning degree of indifference to worship as an outward form, and an utterly radical intensification of worship as an inward experience of the heart. (215–216)*

Take the opportunity in this lesson to investigate how your students are processing what they are learning. If they are truly absorbing what Christian Hedonism teaches, they should arrive at the sense of devastation that is described in Day 4.



## Day 1

### THE HOW AND WHOM OF WORSHIP

One of the most interesting and provocative passages on the nature of worship in the New Testament is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. The story is reproduced here in full:

John 4:7–26

<sup>7</sup> There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."<sup>8</sup> (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."<sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."<sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.<sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him

must worship in spirit and truth.”<sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

1. When the conversation turns to worship (verses 19 and following) what issue does the Samaritan woman raise? How does Jesus respond?

- **ANSWER.** *The Samaritan woman raises the issue of worship’s location, the where of worship. Jesus responds by diminishing the importance of location and elevating the who and whom of worship.*

2. What do you think it means to worship in spirit and truth?

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

*“Proper worship in any age is critically predicated upon adequate and accurate knowledge of the God worshipped. No matter how ceremonially elaborate, emotionally rousing, or sermonically eloquent, worship that is not offered from a proper understanding of who God is falls short.*

*...Thus, true worship is not a matter of geographical location (worship in a church building), physical posture (kneeling or standing), or following a particular liturgy or external rituals; it is a matter of the heart and of the Spirit.”<sup>31</sup>*

Consider this Old Testament passage on worship—a passage which is, in itself, an expression of biblical worship:

Psalm 96:6–8

<sup>6</sup> *Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!*

<sup>8</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts!”*

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<sup>31</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, John (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 155–156, 157.

3. Underline in the passage above any words or phrases that are associated with worship. What does this passage assert about worship? Select the correct answer.
- a) Worship is an act whereby we increase God's glory.
  - b) Worship is an act whereby we proclaim the glory God already has.
  - c) Worship is concerned mostly with our feelings and not God's glory.
  - d) Worship is something everyone always does, consciously or not.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 81–85

- ▷ start at “The How and Whom of Worship”
- ▷ end at “How to Worship God In Vain”

4. Match the following concepts to John Piper's picture of true worship.
- |                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. furnace of worship | a. the quickening of the Holy Spirit |
| 2. fuel of worship    | b. a true vision of God              |
| 3. heat of worship    | c. the renewed spirit of man         |
| 4. fire of worship    | d. the vital affections of worship   |

· **ANSWER.** 1c; 2b; 3d; 4a

5. Record John Piper's one-sentence description of worship (84). What is your initial reaction to this definition?

· **ANSWER.** “Worship is a way of gladly reflecting back to God the radiance of his worth.” Initial reactions will vary from student to student.

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 77–80

## Day 2

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### FEELINGS FOR GOD

I'm just not a touchy-feely kind of person," you might hear someone say. "I don't get all mushy over God."

There are many ways to explain away our need for emotional engagement in worship. The example above is a common one. But find that person in front of a tear-jerking movie or in the stadium watching their favorite sports team. You might find that they are indeed capable of expressive outbursts of intense emotion.

So why not intense emotions in worship of God?

Matthew 15:4-9

*<sup>4</sup> For God commanded, "Honor your father and your mother," and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die."<sup>5</sup> But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,'<sup>6</sup> he need not honor his father." So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.<sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:<sup>8</sup> "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;<sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*

6. What makes worship of God vain?

- **ANSWER.** *Worship of God is vain when it is empty words spoken from a person who does not love God from the heart.*

7. Using this passage, how might you respond to someone who said, "I worship God by praying sometimes and giving money to the church. I don't feel that it's necessary to try to keep all his commands."

- **ANSWER.** *One could warn this person that their prayers and giving is probably unacceptable to God. God is concerned with a heart that loves him (and the obedience that flows from that) and not with outward gifts alone.*

So, if God is concerned with worship that flows from the heart, how will genuine worship manifest itself?

Psalm 46:10

<sup>10</sup> *Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!*

Psalm 33:8

<sup>8</sup> *Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!*

Isaiah 8:13

<sup>13</sup> *But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.*

Isaiah 57:15

<sup>15</sup> *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite."*

Luke 6:21

<sup>21</sup> *Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.*

Psalm 42:1–2

<sup>1</sup> *As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. <sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?*

Psalm 63:1

<sup>1</sup> *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 30:11–12

<sup>11</sup> *You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, <sup>12</sup> that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!*

Psalm 32:11

<sup>11</sup> *Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!*

8. Respond to the following statement.

“It is not proper to get too carried away with emotions in our worship of God. Rather, we should be reverent in his presence.”

- **ANSWER.** *Many things could be said to this statement. First, it is possible to get “carried away” with emotions. But in this case, the problem is never the intensity of the emotions, but that the emotions aren’t fueled by the truth or are coerced. Second, reverence for God is only one of the emotions that is fitting for worship. As the above references prove, the full gamut of our emotions should be engaged in our worship of God.*

Here is Piper’s assessment of his own contemporary scene in 1981. Has much changed?

*“I feel right now in an almost impossible pastoral position. What I want to say can be so easily categorized and dispensed with as emotionalism on the one hand or dead decency on the other, depending on your personality and experience. We live in a peculiar time. On the one hand, fascination with feelings is rampant. Psychology is the science of our era. Book after book helps us analyze our emotions and cope with their ups and downs. On the other hand, there is a widespread suspicion of emotion and embarrassment about expressing feelings, especially in the mainline churches (like ours). In response to this situation I want to say, first, that genuine worship is based on the mind’s perception of historical and biblical truth. It has solid intellectual content. It is not the frenzied emotional product of manipulation or gimmickry. But that is not our problem. We are not in danger of emotionalism. Far from it. Our problem—and not ours only, but the problem of our Conference and of most evangelicals nationwide—is that we do not realize that there is no genuine worship where feelings for God are not quickened. There is not true worship where the heart is far from God. But the heart’s approach to God happens in the quickening of our feelings for God. Therefore, where feelings are dead, so is worship.”<sup>32</sup>*

It’s important to emphasize here that this is a description of Piper’s “own contemporary scene in 1981.” It may be a fruitful discussion to talk about how your setting is similar or different and the related challenges.

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32 John Piper, “Worship Is an End in Itself,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 85–90

- ▷ start at “How to Worship God in Vain”
- ▷ stop at “Worship as an End in Itself”

Remember to read this quote aloud so that your students can check their answers.

9. Fill-in-the-blank:

“Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead.” (88)

10. In Lesson 4 we learned that a changed heart with new affections is a part of what conversion is. How does the nature of conversion, then, relate to the nature of true worship?

- **ANSWER.** *At conversion, the capacity for true worship of God is created. Someone who lacks the glad-hearted apprehension of God’s glory not only cannot worship God—they are not truly converted! Therefore, we must be clear about what true worship is so that those who are unconverted don’t have a false assurance that they are worshipping God when, in fact, they are not.*

## Day 3

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### ENJOYING HIM FOREVER

In the previous two days' study, we've argued that true worship happens when the heart and mind are fixed upon God. Comprehension of biblical truth and corresponding godly affections are both vital. In this lesson we will examine the claim that God-centered worship is an end in itself.

Revelation 4:8–11

<sup>8</sup> *And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"*<sup>9</sup> *And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,*<sup>10</sup> *the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,*<sup>11</sup> *"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."*

11. What activities will endure into eternity? Will evangelism? Will missions? Will worship?
  - **ANSWER.** *As Revelation 4 portrays, we will worship God for all eternity. He will never cease to be worthy of our worship and praise. Therefore, whatever temporary activities of the church exist in this age (such as evangelism and missions), they exist for the ultimate sake of worship.*<sup>33</sup>

Now read the following reflections about the uniqueness of worship:

*"I want to try this morning to create a consciousness in our church that worship is an end in itself. I want us to have this conviction: that worship should never be pursued as a means to achieving something other than worship. Worship is never a step on our way up to any other experience. It is not a door through which we pass to get anywhere. It is the end point, the goal.*

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<sup>33</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010) Used by permission.

*I remember one night in my room in Saint Hall at Wheaton College my senior year. I was struggling with what should motivate me to try to win people to Christ. I asked myself, "What's the goal of winning people to faith in Christ?" And I answered, uncomfortably, "So that they can help win others." But then I translated that purpose into an actual witnessing experience. Suppose a person asks me: "Why do you want me to become a Christian?" And I say, "So you can win others." Won't a thoughtful person look at me and say, "Well now, that's strange. You mean the goal of your religion is to recruit people to recruit other people to recruit other people, on and on? Where's the substance? Where's the content?" I remember how miserable I felt as I realized how empty and mechanical my life with Christ had become. I could never have suggested such an empty answer to, "Why evangelize?" if my own life or worship had been a real end in itself. Of course the purpose for winning people to Christ is not that they might win others. It's that they might bring honor to God in worship and that they might experience the joy of trusting God's mercy. We do not recruit people to recruit others. We recruit people for God! The content, the substance, the life, the goal, the end is God and the joyful experience of ascribing glory to him. Evangelism is not an end in itself. Worship is an end in itself.*

*From that point on, all my thinking about the church revolved around the uniqueness of worship. Of all the activities in the church, only one is an end in itself: worship."<sup>34</sup>*

12. What is the significance of the statement, "Worship is an end in itself"? In other words, why might it be important to understand that worship is an end in itself?

- **ANSWER.** *This understanding gives remarkable focus to all of our activities. By discerning that worship should be the goal of all we do, we keep proper perspective. And by understanding that worship is primarily a matter of the heart, we can consciously strive to delight ourselves in God. God will receive greater glory from us when we intentionally seek to satisfy ourselves in him.*

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34 John Piper, "Worship Is an End in Itself," an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

If worship is the goal of all that we do, and worship is the spontaneous overflow of delight in the heart, then we should pursue our joy in God as an end in itself.

The objection comes swiftly: “If you are pursuing the joy of worship as an end in itself, aren’t you making God a means to your happiness? Does this elevate joy above God?”

Notice the following passages:

Philippians 2:1–2

<sup>1</sup> *So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,* <sup>2</sup> *complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

2 John 1:12

<sup>12</sup> *Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.*

Hebrews 12:1–2

<sup>1</sup> *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,* <sup>2</sup> *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

13. Are Paul and John acting selfishly by pursuing their joy? Is Jesus?

- **ANSWER.** *No, none of them are acting selfishly in pursuing joy. The joy that they are pursuing is a joy in God, whether that joy in God arises from Christian obedience, Christian fellowship, or being exalted to the right hand of God. Joy can never be an idol! It’s the source of joy that can be an idol if it’s not ultimately God.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 90–96

- ▷ start at “Worship as an End in Itself”
- ▷ stop at “Three Stages of Worship”

14. Do you agree that “the secret of joy is self-forgetfulness”? Why or Why not?

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

*“I am keenly aware of the criticism that the direct pursuit of joy by taking one’s eyes off The Enjoyed is deadly. I am not commending that you go to the Grand Canyon of God’s greatness and sit on the rim with your finger on your pulse and your mind on your inner condition. That would cancel out the Canyon. Give yourself up to the Canyon. See it. Revel in it. Absorb it. Ponder it. That is the kind of pursuit I have in mind. God’s all-satisfying glory is not experienced by focusing on the experience, but on the glory.”<sup>35</sup>*

15. When might the statement, “We worship God because it is our creaturely duty to give honor to the only one who is worthy to receive it,” be a misleading statement?

· **ANSWER.** *The statement would be misleading if it were offered as the exclusive, or even primary, reason for why we worship God. The statement does not imply anything about the emotions. It could result in a bland, stoic response to God that flows more from calculated logic and a sense of duty than true enjoyment of the beauty of God.*

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<sup>35</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010) 227 fn 19. Used by permission.

## Day 4

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### THE FEAST OF CHRISTIAN HEDONISM

And so our vision of God's glory and the resulting worship—our joyful expression of praise—is the feast of Christian Hedonism. But don't be misled. The feast is a compulsory one. God demands the worship of his creatures.

Jeremiah 2:5–13

*<sup>5</sup> Thus says the LORD: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? <sup>6</sup> They did not say, 'Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?' <sup>7</sup> And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. <sup>8</sup> The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. <sup>9</sup> Therefore I still contend with you, declares the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend. <sup>10</sup> For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has been such a thing. <sup>11</sup> Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. <sup>12</sup> Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, <sup>13</sup> for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."*

16. How does this passage describe the abandonment of pleasure in God?

- **ANSWER.** *Forsaking God, the "fountain of living waters," is an appalling evil. It is certainly foolish to go after that which is worthless and does not profit. But this foolishness is also utter wickedness. It is unspeakable sin for God's people to seek for their own sources of profit.*

When we understand that genuine and intense feelings for God are essential in true worship, we immediately recognize that a lack of those feelings is sin. This should be a devastating indictment of half-hearted worship. Read the testimony of John Piper:

*“When I saw the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, I was freed from the unbiblical bondage of fear that it was wrong to pursue joy. What once had seemed like an inevitable but defective quest for the satisfaction of my soul now became not just permitted but required. The glory of God was at stake. This was almost too good to be true—that my quest for joy and my duty to glorify God were not in conflict. Indeed they were one. Pursuing joy in God was a non-negotiable way of honoring God. It was essential. This was a liberating discovery. It released the energies of my mind and heart to go hard after all the soul-happiness that God is for me in Jesus.*

*But simultaneous with the liberation came the devastation. I was freed to pursue my fullest joy in God without guilt. Indeed, I was commanded to pursue it. Indifference to the pursuit of joy in God would be indifference to the glory of God, and that is sin. Therefore, my quest took on a seriousness, an earnestness, a gravity that I never dreamed would be part of pursuing joy. And then, almost immediately, came the realization that my indwelling sin stands in the way of my full satisfaction in God. It opposes and perverts my pursuit of God. It opposes by making other things look more desirable than God. And it perverts by making me think I am pursuing joy in God when, in fact, I am in love with his gifts.*

*... This discovery was devastating to me. It still is. I was made to know and enjoy God. I was freed by the doctrine of Christian Hedonism to pursue that knowledge and that joy with all my heart. And then, to my dismay, I discovered that it is not an easy doctrine. Christian Hedonism is not a lowering of the bar. Out of the blue, as it were, I realized that the bar had been raised. Manageable, duty-defined, decision-oriented, willpower Christianity now seemed easy, and real Christianity had become impossible. The emotions—or affections, as former generations called them—which I was now free to enjoy, proved to be beyond my reach. The Christian life became impossible. That is, it became supernatural.*

*Now there was only one hope, the sovereign grace of God. God would have to transform my heart to do what a heart cannot make itself do, namely, want what*

*it ought to want. Only God can make the depraved heart desire God. ... Pursuing what we want is possible. It is easy. It is a pleasant kind of freedom. But the only freedom that lasts is pursuing what we want when we want what we ought. And it is devastating to discover we don't, and we can't.*

*This is why the most common and desperate question I have received over the last three decades is: What can I do? How can I become the kind of person the Bible is calling me to be? The question comes from an aching in the heart that rises from the hope of great joy. People listen to the biblical arguments for Christian Hedonism, or they read *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. Many are persuaded. They see that the truth and beauty and worth of God shine best from the lives of saints who are so satisfied in God they can suffer in the cause of love without murmuring. But then they say, 'That's not who I am. I don't have that kind of liberating, love-producing, risk-taking satisfaction in God. I desire comfort and security more than God.' Many say it with tears and trembling.*

*Some are honest enough to say, 'I don't know if I have ever tasted this kind of desire. Christianity was never presented to me like this. I never knew that the desire for God and delight in God were crucial. I was always told that feelings didn't matter. Now I am finding evidence all over the Bible that the pursuit of joy in God, and the awakening of all kinds of spiritual affections, are part of the essence of the newborn Christian heart. This discovery excites me and frightens me. I want this. But I fear I don't have it. In fact, as far as I can see, it is outside my power to obtain.'*<sup>36</sup>

17. Does any of this resonate with your own experience of Christian Hedonism? Underline particularly relevant sentences and record your reflections below.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

Is there any hope, then, for those who want to desire God with the desire of which he is worthy? Will Christian Hedonism sentence us to despair?

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<sup>36</sup> Taken from *When I Don't Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#13-15. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

*“The difference between desire for God and delight in God is important mainly to make clear that finite creatures like us, who have a spiritual taste for the glory of God, will always want more of God than we presently experience—even in eternity. There will always be more of God to enjoy. Which means there will always be holy desire—forever.*

*In this age that is frustrating. We kick ourselves that our cravings for lesser things compete with God as the satisfaction of our souls. Rightly so. This is godly grief. We do well to be convicted and penitent. We know that we have tasted pleasures at his right hand, and that our desires for them are pitifully small compared to their true worth. It is helpful at this point to be reminded that our desires—no matter how small—have been awakened by the spiritual taste we once had of the presence of God. They are an evidence that we have tasted. It is also helpful at this point to be reminded that our desires are only a tiny part of what is to come. The strength of our desire is not the measure of the strength of the final pleasure. That truth can rescue us from despair and keep us fighting in this fallen world for all the joy possible in God.”<sup>37</sup>*

Psalm 69:1–3, 5

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. <sup>2</sup> I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. <sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. . . . <sup>5</sup> O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.

Psalm 6:1–9

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. <sup>2</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. <sup>3</sup> My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long? <sup>4</sup> Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. <sup>5</sup> For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise? <sup>6</sup> I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. <sup>7</sup> My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes. <sup>8</sup> Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. <sup>9</sup> The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer.

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<sup>37</sup> Taken from *When I Don't Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#27-28. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers ,Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

Psalm 56:8

<sup>8</sup> *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?*

Matthew 5:4

<sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

Psalm 42:5–9

<sup>5</sup> *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation <sup>6</sup> and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. <sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. <sup>8</sup> By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. <sup>9</sup> I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”*

18. Are these expressions of worship also? Defend your answer.

- **ANSWER.** *Yes, any cry or whimper or groaning or plea to God, asking for more of him and being sorrowful over the deadness of our heart, is pleasing in his sight. This is so because it still exalts God as the source of our (anticipated) joy. Even the fact that these psalms are included in the canon suggests that they should instruct and shape our worship and prayers.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 96–102

- ▷ start at “Three Stages of Worship”
- ▷ stop at “An Affair of the Mind”

19. Take notes on the three stages of worship as described by John Piper.

First Stage	Second Stage	Third Stage
<p><i>where worship starts; is sorry for having little love; gladness is anticipated</i></p>	<p><i>characterized by longing rather than fullness; pleasure in God stimulates more hunger for him</i></p>	<p><i>unencumbered joy; satisfaction in God which spills over into fervent worship</i></p>

20. Have you ever heard a statement similar to “Worship is supposed to be a time of service and honor to God, a sacrifice of praise, and not a time for self-fulfillment and enjoyment”? If so, record the statement below with you reflections about it.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Further Reading:** We strongly recommend that you read this closing section, if you have the time, since it stresses the need for genuine worship to be based on the truth. It also contains some helpful ideas about the form of worship.

*Desiring God*, pages 102–109

▷ start at “An Affair of the Mind”

 INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT



Compose your own, original psalm in which you worship the LORD. Let it explode with delight in God or be an earnest plea to God for more of his fullness. Let what you have studied in this lesson guide what you compose.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Review the following questions in preparation for discussion. Record any lingering questions that you may have after completing the lesson.

1. Describe to the class one of the most intense and satisfying experiences of worshipping God you have had.
2. What are the dangers of “worshipping” with head and no heart? What are the dangers of “worshipping” with heart and no head?
3. Consider the three stages of worship that John Piper discerns. In which stage do you find yourself most often? How might you move into a “higher stage” of worship?
4. Your own question(s):



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ “What Unites Us in Worship at Bethlehem?” an online article at the Desiring God website
- ▷ “Gravity and Gladness on a Sunday Morning,” a TBI seminar at the Desiring God website
- ▷ John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1996).
- ▷ *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).
- ▷ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, chapter 34
- ▷ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).



# God-Centered Love

# 7

## Lesson Seven

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### § INTRODUCTION

The world is in a state of confusion about love. No one can deny its existence, but how should we describe it? How can we give and receive it?

In this lesson we will seek to define love biblically. Comprehending the relationship between love and joy will be one of our central tasks. How does a Christian Hedonist love?

It may be beneficial to illustrate how our culture talks about love by finding examples or quotes from non-believing sources that give a definition or description of love.

### § LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ state John Piper's two definitions of love
- ▷ explain how these two definitions of love are related
- ▷ identify the relationship between faith and love



## TEACHING NOTES

This lesson is about love, and what defines genuine love. With so much confusion about what love actually is, memorizing the two brief definitions of love that Piper offers might be helpful:

*[Love] is the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of others. (Desiring God, 119)*

*Love is what exists between people when they find their joy in each other's joy. (Desiring God, 123)*

Once your students grasp these definitions of love, ensure that they understand the relationship between the two. Here is an illustration which may help:

*Imagine yourself as a massive bowl, set beside a fountain. The fountain is the love of God which, as it spurts, spills its joy into the bowl. The bowl begins to fill up with the joy of God. Before long, the bowl is full and begins to overflow into another bowl that is beside it. This other bowl (which represents another person) then begins to fill up with water (joy). When it reaches its fullness, it spills back into the first bowl. There is joy in the Christian life as we pour ourselves into others from the fullness that God has poured into us. And our joy is redoubled as we see and experience the joy of God filling those to whom we minister and eventually flowing back to us. The most loving thing one bowl can do for another, however, is to help position it by the fountain so that it receives joy directly from the ultimate source of joy—God.*

In explaining the God-centered nature of love, please refer to *God Is the Gospel*, 152–154. Here are some key citations that might be helpful to share with your students:

*... The primary way that Jesus loved this family was by doing what he must do to display to them in a compelling way his own glory. (153)*

But let us learn from Jesus what love is and what our true well-being is. Love is doing whatever you need to do to help people see and savor the glory of God in Christ forever and ever. Love keeps God central. (153)

As always, make connections between this lesson and previous lessons. If the greatest good of the gospel and all of life is the glorious God, then of course it would only be loving of God and us to “give God” to other people. This is what we aim to do in our lives of faith—lovingly battle for our faith and the faith of others by exalting the supremacy of God.



## Day 1

### DISINTERESTED LOVE?

We have all heard opinions about what love is or is not. One common sentiment is that love should be blind to reward or that love is its own reward. Is this what the Bible teaches?

1 Corinthians 13:1–7

*<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Now focus in on verse 5.

1 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV)

*<sup>5</sup> [Love] does not insist on its own way ...*

1 Corinthians 13:5 (NASB)

*<sup>5</sup> [Love] does not seek its own ...*

1 Corinthians <sup>13:5</sup> (NIV)

*<sup>5</sup> [Love] is not self-seeking ...*

1. If love “does not seek its own” (NASB), does this mean that love does not pursue its own joy? Does 1 Corinthians 13:5 contradict Christian Hedonism? Examine the broader context and record your reflections below.

- **ANSWER.** *As 1 Corinthians 13:3 demonstrates, love is not unaware of “gain” or reward. It’s clear also that love is not devoid of joy since “love rejoices with the truth” (13:6). It therefore seems reasonable to assume that Paul intended to say that love doesn’t seek its own private, isolated pleasure. Rather, love pursues pleasure in the well-being of others.*

Notice the following verses also:

Micah 6:8

<sup>8</sup> *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

1 Thessalonians 2:8, 10, 19–20

<sup>8</sup> *So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. ...* <sup>10</sup> *You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ...* <sup>19</sup> *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?* <sup>20</sup> *For you are our glory and joy.*

2. According to these two passages, what is the relationship between joy and love?

- **ANSWER.** *First, Micah 6:8 instructs us to “love” kindness. We must take pleasure in showing kindness to other people by command of the Lord. Second, as Paul is describing the love he has for the Thessalonians, he doesn’t hesitate to tell them that they are a source of joy to him. Therefore, it seems that joy is indispensable to love and that love should be an expression of our joy.*

Here are additional verses that might cause us to reconsider the relationship between our own pleasure and the exercise of love.

1 Corinthians 10:24, 32–33

<sup>24</sup> Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. ... <sup>32</sup> Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, <sup>33</sup> just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Romans 15:1–3

<sup>1</sup> We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. <sup>3</sup> For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

3. Interact with the following statement. “As these verses clearly teach, love is about self-denial. We must not consider what will make us happy, but only what will make others happy.”
  - **ANSWER.** *As our previous answers have suggested, this statement is a distortion of what Paul teaches. Paul wants his converts to find delight in serving others and not in confining their attention and service to themselves. Love that takes no delight in the service which it renders is not love at all.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 111–116

▷ stop at “Love Is More Than Deeds”

4. Put the objections of page 112 into your own words and then summarize John Piper’s response:
  - **ANSWER.** *The objection is that our own pleasure should not be a motive for the loving deeds we do. John Piper responds by asserting that love “does not seek its own private, limited joy, but instead seeks its own joy in the good—the salvation and edification—of others” (116).*
5. True / False. The motive for God’s love is the delight it brings him to love.

## Day 2

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### LOVE IS THE OVERFLOW OF JOY

Thus far we've established that the Bible does not present love as totally disinterested in its own pleasure. In this day's study, then, we will try to clarify the relationship between love and joy.

1 Corinthians 13:3

<sup>3</sup> *If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

John 15:13

<sup>13</sup> *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.*

6. Is it loving to sacrifice your own life or not? Do 1 Corinthians 13:3 and John 15:3 contradict each other? If not, why not?

- **ANSWER.** *These verses do not contradict each other. John 15:13 indicates that love can be measured by the level of sacrifice it is willing to make. 1 Corinthians 13:3 adds that sacrifice, in itself, is not necessarily loving. Neither John 15:3 nor 1 Corinthians 13:3 tell us what must compel the sacrifice in order for it to be loving.*

1 Corinthians 13:3 clearly states that it is possible to be self-giving in the extreme—even to the point of making the “ultimate sacrifice”—and still lack love. What, then, makes an action loving?

2 Corinthians 8:1–8

<sup>1</sup> *We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— <sup>5</sup> and this, not as we expected, but they*

*gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.* <sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. <sup>7</sup> But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. <sup>8</sup> I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

7. Can 2 Corinthians 8:1–8 be a legitimate source for learning about what love is? Support your answer. And if so, what do we learn about love from this passage?

· **ANSWER.** *Paul is urging the Corinthians to take part in the relief of the saints—an action he describes as an “act of grace.” He wants the Corinthians to excel in their giving and to prove that their love is genuine (v. 8). The Macedonians are offered as the model for their giving and love, and it is clear that the Macedonians gave out of the overflow of their own joy.*

Here is an observation John Piper makes about this passage:

*“The giving of these poor, afflicted new believers was not just free, it was passionate. Giving for them was so much a part of their joy in God’s grace that they begged to give. ‘Please let us give.’ This probably means that Paul was trying to stop them from giving since he knew they were poor. And they were saying, ‘No, Paul, our joy will not be complete until it overflows to meet the needs of others. Let us give.’”* <sup>38</sup>

A little bit later in the same epistle, Paul writes this:

2 Corinthians 9:6–7

*<sup>6</sup> The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

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<sup>38</sup> John Piper, “Treasuring Christ Together: North Campus Expansion, Part 1, Begging for the Favor of Blessing Others” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)

8. Why should Paul bother to add verse 7 (above)? In other words, what would be missing from his exhortation if he hadn't mentioned what he did in verse 7?

· **ANSWER.** *Verse 7 clarifies the manner in which the sowing (giving) should be done. The implication is that the Corinthians will not reap bountifully if they merely give reluctantly or from a sense of compulsion. God desires us to give cheerfully—that is, with joy. Our giving (and loving deeds!) are worthless if not compelled by joy.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 116–121

- ▷ start at “Love Is More Than Deeds”
- ▷ stop at “Love Rejoices in the Joy of the Beloved”

9. Record John Piper's definition of love (from 2 Corinthians 8):

· **ANSWER.** *Love is “the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of others” (119).<sup>10</sup> According to John Piper's definition, can an unbeliever exhibit true love?*

10. According to John Piper's definition, can an unbeliever exhibit true love?

· **ANSWER.** *This is not an issue which John Piper addresses, but we would probably have to answer with a qualified “no.” By God's common grace, unbelievers can certainly meet the needs of others with joy.*

And as we will see in the next day's study, unbelievers can love by rejoicing in the joy of their beloved. However, their love is never an overflow of joy in God. Therefore, unbelievers will always, to some degree, manipulate other people to meet their needs since their needs are not being met by God. In asserting this we must be careful not to be proud; the Christian's love is also never completely free from the taint of sin.

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 275–284

## Day 3

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### LOVE REJOICES IN THE JOY OF THE BELOVED

At this point, it might be helpful to meditate on your own experience. If you are married, meditate for a while on how you love your spouse. If you are not married, meditate on how you love your closest friend or family member. What does this teach you about love and your joy?

Now look at Paul's experience with the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 1:23–2:4

*<sup>23</sup> But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. <sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. <sup>2:1</sup> For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup> For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? <sup>3</sup> And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. <sup>4</sup> For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.*

11. Working from this passage, derive a definition of love. Then compare it to your answer to 9.
  - **ANSWER.** *Paul describes his ministry as a ministry of working for the Corinthians' joy (1:24). Paul delighted to cause other people to delight in God. Therefore, love is when you take pleasure in making others joyful in God. Love is an overflow of joy in God that delights in causing others to overflow with joy in God also.*

In Acts 20, Paul meets the Ephesian elders for the last time. The book of Acts records his lengthy exhortation to them on that occasion. It ends with the following words:

Acts 20:34–35

<sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

12. Why should the Ephesian elders remember the words of Jesus? Why was this so significant?

- **ANSWER.** *In helping the weak, a constant temptation is to become frustrated. To fight against this temptation—which, if indulged, would result in a lack of love—Paul urges them to call to mind the blessing that is found in service. Keeping in mind the reward of love is one way to fight for love.*

We’ve read Paul’s words; now read Peter’s instructions pertaining to “pastoral duty.”

1 Peter 5:1–4

<sup>1</sup> So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

13. In what manner should the elders shepherd the flock? What is the motivation Peter provides for them?

- **ANSWER.** *Peter charges the elders to shepherd “willingly” and “eagerly” (v. 2). What does he mean by these terms? One clue is to look at what he presents as the wrongful alternatives: “under compulsion” and “for shameful gain” (v. 2). This suggests that oversight should be done cheerfully. The motivation is the “crown of glory” (v. 4). So we might say that with joy in God is the manner in which the elders should love and joy in God is the incentive for which they serve!*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 121–129

- ▷ start at “Love Rejoices in the Joy of the Beloved”
- ▷ stop at “Love Suffers for Joy”

14. Will people feel loved if you tell them that you are seeking your joy in their good? Do you agree with Piper’s assessment?

- **ANSWER.** *Yes. In fact, as Piper suggests, they will not feel loved unless you are seeking your joy in their good. For who wants to be served when the service is rendered out of a sense of compulsion or duty? Who wants to be loved by someone who does not delight in loving them?*

15. Interact with the following statement. “There is a common deficiency in the church today: our pursuit of pleasure is far too weak.”

- **ANSWER.** *This is a truthful statement as long as the pursuit of pleasure is conceived as a pursuit of pleasure in God. When we fall short of the glory of God by sinning, it is evident that we are not pursuing a higher and purer pleasure that can only be found in God.*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 129–136

- ▷ start at “Love Suffers for Joy”
- ▷ end at “Love’s Deed and Reward Are Organically Related”

## Day 4

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### LOVE'S DEED AND REWARD

In this day's study, we first respond to a possible distortion of what we've been studying.

Suppose someone said, "I give a lot of money to the church because I want to have it better in heaven. It's not that I really enjoy giving away my money, but I am motivated by heavenly reward." Such a person might agree that love should be motivated by a desire for joy, but is this how a Christian Hedonist would talk?

There are many texts in the New Testament which discuss heavenly rewards. Here is one:

Matthew 5:10–12

*<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

16. Although this text is not explicit, what do you think our heavenly rewards will consist of?

• **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

Jonathan Edwards discusses heavenly rewards. Although defining what heavenly rewards are is not the express purpose of this next excerpt, see if you can discern how Edwards might speak of the nature of heavenly rewards:

*"There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven.*

*... It will be no damp to the happiness of those who have lower degrees of happiness and glory, that there are others advanced in glory above them: for all shall be perfectly happy, every one shall be perfectly satisfied. Every vessel that is cast into this ocean of happiness is full, though there are some vessels far larger than others;*

*and there shall be no such thing as envy in heaven, but perfect love shall reign through the whole society. Those who are not so high in glory as others, will not envy those that are higher, but they will have so great, and strong, and pure love to them, that they will rejoice in their superior happiness; their love to them will be such that they will rejoice that they are happier than themselves; so that instead of having a damp to their own happiness, it will add to it.”<sup>39</sup>*

What Jonathan Edwards seems to suggest is that heavenly rewards will be increased capacities for delighting in and reflecting the glory of God. Though every vessel in the ocean of heaven’s happiness is full, the vessels are of varying capacities.

This suggestion would effectively answer anyone who desires “heavenly reward,” but does not love other people. Such a person most probably has a skewed understanding of what our heavenly rewards will be. If they do not delight in the overflow of joy in God meeting the needs of others, they won’t desire a greater fullness of joy in God in heaven.

Does the Bible offer any support for this idea?

Luke 6:32–35

*<sup>32</sup> If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.*

17. How might this passage pertain to what we’ve been studying? What is the relationship between the various phrases in verse 35?

- **ANSWER.** *Luke 6:35 suggests that our heavenly reward consists of a greater conformity to the character of our merciful God. And why would it be a reward for us to be more like God? Presumably, it is our joy to be more like God. We will feel delight in showing mercy just as God delights in showing mercy.*

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Edwards, as quoted by John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010) 89. Used by permission.

Finally, we want to add one further clarification to the nature of love in the New Testament. True love is God-centered.

John 11:1–6

<sup>1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” <sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

18. This passage makes it very clear that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters (11:3, 5). Why, then, would Jesus delay coming to Lazarus so that Lazarus would die? Is this love? Read the broader context of John 11 to answer this question.
  - **ANSWER.** *To the modern mind, Jesus’ act seems totally unloving: he lets his friend die. Yet, Jesus must have thought it loving to let Lazarus experience death so that he and his sisters could see the glory of God (11:4; cf. 11:40) and believe. This is a radical kind of God-centered love. Jesus does not spare this family great pain, but his loving plan is for the greater display of God’s glory.*

Please notice the difference between these three English versions:

John 11:6 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup> So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

John 11:6 (NASB)

<sup>6</sup> So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

John 11:6 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

The NIV mistranslates the key Greek word that indicates that Jesus acts as he does out of love for Lazarus and his sisters.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 137–141

19. Why do you think John Piper includes the section entitled, “Love’s Deed and Reward are Organically Related?”

· **ANSWER.** *John Piper probably wrote this section to guard against the false notion of a love that would serve others (perhaps begrudgingly) with a view to a reward that wasn’t at all related to the act of love.*

20. What possible danger do we risk if we talk about heavenly rewards solely in terms of bigger mansions in glory, positions of heavenly power, or celestial wealth?

· **ANSWER.** *If we disconnect heavenly rewards from the delight we’ll have in the glory of God, we risk motivating Christians by the carnal lusts of their flesh. One does not need to be a converted Christian (Hedonist) in order to be motivated by greater possessions, power, wealth, or fame.*

 INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT



Write a letter to someone you know in ministry, encouraging them and thanking them for the love that they have poured into your life. Thank them for the delight they take in serving you.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Review the following questions in preparation for discussion. Record any lingering questions that you may have after completing the lesson.

1. Describe to the class one of the most loving people you have known. What made them loving? Were they also joyful?
2. What definitions of love have you heard in the past? How are they different or similar to John Piper's definition of love?
3. How does "pursuing our joy" and "faith in future grace" fit together in loving other people?
4. Your own question(s):



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012): Geoffrey Bles, 1960).
- ▷ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999).
- ▷ D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002).
- ▷ John Piper, “Thankful for the Love of God! Why?” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).



# Being God-Centered in Reading Scripture

# 8

## Lesson Eight

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

Consider an experience John Piper had one morning:

*Let me tell you about a most wonderful experience I had early Monday morning, March 19, 2007, a little after six o'clock. God actually spoke to me. There is no doubt that it was God. I heard the words in my head just as clearly as when a memory of a conversation passes across your consciousness. The words were in English, but they had about them an absolutely self-authenticating ring of truth. I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God still speaks today.*

*I couldn't sleep for some reason. I was at Shalom House in northern Minnesota on a staff couples' retreat. It was about five thirty in the morning. I lay there wondering if I should get up or wait till I got sleepy again. In his mercy, God moved me out of bed. It was mostly dark, but I managed to find my clothing, got dressed, grabbed my briefcase, and slipped out of the room without waking up Noël. In the main room below, it was totally quiet. No one else seemed to be up. So I sat down on a couch in the corner to pray.*

*As I prayed and mused, suddenly it happened. God said, "Come and see what I have done." There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that these were the very words of God. In this very moment. At this very place in the twenty-first century, 2007, God was speaking to me with absolute authority and self-evidencing reality. I paused to let this sink in. There was a sweetness about it. Time seemed to matter*

*little. God was near. He had me in his sights. He had something to say to me. When God draws near, hurry ceases. Time slows down.*

*I wondered what he meant by “come and see.” Would he take me somewhere, like he did Paul into heaven to see what can’t be spoken? Did “see” mean that I would have a vision of some great deed of God that no one has seen? I am not sure how much time elapsed between God’s initial word, “Come and see what I have done,” and his next words. It doesn’t matter. I was being enveloped in the love of his personal communication. The God of the universe was speaking to me.*

*Then he said, as clearly as any words have ever come into my mind, “I am awesome in my deeds toward the children of man.” My heart leaped up, “Yes, Lord! You are awesome in your deeds. Yes, to all men whether they see it or not. Yes! Now what will you show me?”*

*The words came again. Just as clear as before, but increasingly specific: “I turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There they rejoiced in me—who rules by my might forever.” Suddenly I realized God was taking me back several thousand years to the time when he dried up the Red Sea and the Jordan River. I was being transported by his word back into history to those great deeds. This is what he meant by “come and see.” He was transporting me back by his words to those two glorious deeds before the children of men. These were the “awesome deeds” he referred to. God himself was narrating the mighty works of God. He was doing it for me. He was doing it with words that were resounding in my own mind.*

*There settled over me a wonderful reverence. A palpable peace came down. This was a holy moment and a holy corner of the world in northern Minnesota. God Almighty had come down and was giving me the stillness and the openness and the willingness to hear his very voice. As I marveled at his power to dry the sea and the river, he spoke again. “I keep watch over the nations—let not the rebellious exalt themselves.”*

*This was breathtaking. It was very serious. It was almost a rebuke. At least a warning. He may as well have taken me by the collar of my shirt, lifted me off the ground with one hand, and said, with an incomparable mixture of fierceness and love, “Never, never, never exalt yourself. Never rebel against me.”*

*I sat staring at nothing. My mind was full of the global glory of God. “I keep watch over the nations.” He had said this to me. It was not just that he had said it. Yes, that is glorious. But he had said this to me. The very words of God were in my head. They were there in my head just as much as the words that I am writing at this moment are in my head. They were heard as clearly as if at this moment I recalled that my wife said, “Come down for supper whenever you are ready.” I know those are the words of my wife. And I know these are the words of God.*

*Think of it. Marvel at this. Stand in awe of this. The God who keeps watch over the nations, like some people keep watch over cattle or stock markets or construction sites—this God still speaks in the twenty-first century. I heard his very words. He spoke personally to me.*

*What effect did this have on me? It filled me with a fresh sense of God’s reality. It assured me more deeply that he acts in history and in our time. It strengthened my faith that he is for me and cares about me and will use his global power to watch over me. Why else would he come and tell me these things?*

*It has increased my love for the Bible as God’s very word, because it was through the Bible that I heard these divine words, and through the Bible I have experiences like this almost every day. The very God of the universe speaks on every page into my mind—and your mind. We hear his very words. God himself has multiplied his wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us; none can compare with him! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told (Psalm 40:5).*

*And best of all, they are available to all. If you would like to hear the very same words I heard on the couch in northern Minnesota, read Psalm 66:5–7. That is where I heard them. O how precious is the Bible. It is the very word of God. In it God speaks in the twenty-first century. This is the very voice of God. By this voice, he speaks with absolute truth and personal force. By this voice, he reveals his all-surpassing beauty. By this voice, he reveals the deepest secrets of our hearts. No voice anywhere anytime can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible.*

*It is a great wonder that God still speaks today through the Bible with greater force and greater glory and greater assurance and greater sweetness and greater hope and greater guidance and greater transforming power and greater Christ-exalting truth than can be heard through any voice in any human soul on the planet from outside the Bible.*<sup>40</sup>

In this lesson, we will strive to hear the voice of God in the Bible. And if we hear with faith, we will “see” the glory of God. As it says in 1 Samuel, “And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD” (1 Samuel 3:21, italics added). John Piper comments, “The spiritual hearing of God’s Word becomes the spiritual seeing of God’s glory.”<sup>41</sup>

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ describe how reading the Bible relates to the fight for joy in God
- ▷ explain how reading the Old Testament and biblical commands is done in faith
- ▷ move forward with a specific plan for reading the Bible as a Christian Hedonist

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<sup>40</sup> This excerpt was taken from “The Morning I Heard the Voice of God,” an online article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org). Read the rest of this article to understand the context in which it was written.

<sup>41</sup> Taken from *When I Don’t Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#95. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).



This lesson affords another opportunity to apply what is commended. We suggest that you cover the basic content of this lesson to ensure understanding, but then spend time discussing practical ways in which Scripture can serve as kindling for the Christian Hedonist. A helpful chapter in this regard is Chapter 8 of *When I Don't Desire God*. Here is an abbreviated catalogue of Piper's suggestions:

1. Formulate a **specific plan** for reading your Bible. Find a secluded place in the early morning. (115–117)
2. Strive to **memorize** verses, chapters, and even books of the Bible. (119–123)
3. Take spiritual **retreats** in which to focus on fellowship with God through his Word. (123)
4. Write out Scripture by hand and **take notes** with a pen or pencil. (123–124)
5. Learn to muse and **meditate** on the Word of God. (124–125)
6. Read **serious books** that teach the Word of God and read Christian biography. (125–129, 132–135)
7. Surround yourself with **Bible-saturated people** and invest yourself in a **Bible-teaching community**. (129–132)

You might also want to take opportunity to commend the neglected discipline of memorizing Scripture. As with everything else in the Christian life, memorizing Scripture is a matter of faith. John Piper illustrates:

You may doubt that you can do this. But ask yourself this question. If someone offered you \$1,000 for every verse you memorized in the next week, how many do you think you could memorize? Yet God says of his word in Psalm 19:10–11, “They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” The real value of the word is far greater than \$1,000 a verse. The question is, Do you believe this? Believing this will be the crucial motivation you need. (This is an excerpt from “Thy Word I Have Treasured in My Heart,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).)

Also consult John Piper's online article entitled, “Why Memorize Scripture?”





## Day 1

### THE BENEFITS OF SCRIPTURE

As we've seen in previous lessons, God rewards those who seek him (Hebrew 11:6). The fight of faith is a fight to value the reward of God as better than the rewards of sin. The Word of God has a crucial role in this fight of faith.

Psalm 1:1–6

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; <sup>6</sup> for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Notice the relationship between verse 2 and verse 3: meditation and delight in God's Word produces enduring fruitfulness.

- Using this passage, respond to the statement.  
 "I pick up the Bible once in a while, but I don't consider it to be necessary for the Christian life."
  - ANSWER.** *These verses implicitly warn us that if we do not put our delight in God's Word, and don't meditate on it, then in a time of testing we will bear no fruit and wither (cf. Mark 4:14–20).*

There is a very broad promise at the end of verse 3: in all that the man of God's Word does, he prospers. Can this be true? Don't the righteous suffer many hardships and setbacks in this life?

*“When this Psalm ponders the value of being wicked or of delighting in the Word of God, it measures the value finally by what happens at the judgment. There may be some prosperity in this life for the wicked, but in the end they will be swept away like chaff, but those who have delighted in the Word of God will go on flourishing because God sets his eye and favor on them. He ‘knows’ their way.*

*So the blessing, the happiness, referred to in verse 1 is a life that is nourishing and fruitful for others, a life that is deeply durable in the face of drought and a life whose ‘labor is not in vain’ (1 Corinthians 15:58), but succeeds in God’s good purposes into eternity. That’s the blessing of delighting in the Word of God and meditating on it day and night.”<sup>42</sup>*

Now notice the testimony of another psalm.

Psalm 19:7–10

*<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. <sup>8</sup> The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. <sup>9</sup> The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. <sup>10</sup> They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.*

2. According to these verses, why might the words of God be more desirable than gold? Why are they sweeter than honey?
  - **ANSWER.** *The words of God are more desirable than gold because they can do things that gold cannot do: restore the soul, impart wisdom, enlighten the eyes, and bring true and lasting joy. By calling them sweeter than honey, the psalmist expresses his great delight in the Word of God.*

Before you answer the next question, please turn back and review Day 4’s study in Lesson 4 and the relationship between faith and joy.

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<sup>42</sup> John Piper, “Meditate on the Word of the Lord Day and Night,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

Now examine the following two passages:

John 20:30–31

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Romans 10:17

<sup>17</sup> So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

3. According to the passages, how might Bible reading be related to joy?

- **ANSWER.** *Reading the Bible is meant to increase our faith. Faith is not a blind, irrational leap, but rather a solid trust rooted in God's revelation of himself. As our faith in God increases, we will trust him more and more to provide us with the satisfaction that our souls crave. So reading the Bible ought to be focused on producing faith in God and satisfaction in him.*

Romans 15:13

<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

And how is reading the Word of God to be done in a God-centered way?

*“One of the ways we can fight against the inclinations that lure us from the Word of God to computers or television or any other substitute pleasure is to remind ourselves often of the immeasurable and superior benefits of the Word of God in our lives. We must put the evidence before us that reading, pondering, memorizing, and studying the Bible will yield more joy in this life and the next than all the things that lure us from it.*

*There are many different reasons why the Bible has this joy-producing effect. I don't want to minimize this diversity or belittle the range of benefits that the Bible has in our lives—more than any of us realizes. But I want to stress that ultimately, in and through all its benefits, the Bible leads us to superior and lasting joy because it leads us to Christ, especially to see his glory and enjoy his fellowship. All the varied benefits are beneficial finally because they show us and bring us more of Christ to enjoy.”<sup>43</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 143–152

▷ stop at “An Earnest Exhortation”

4. Why do you think John Piper begins this chapter in the way he does?

· **ANSWER.** *The aim of this chapter is to help us to use the Bible to revive our joy in God. This is crucial because it is a struggle to keep our joy in God, as the Bible itself acknowledges and often implies.*

5. Fill-in-the-blank.

“Satan’s number-one objective is to destroy our joy of faith. We have one offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God” (151).

Remember to read the quote aloud so that students can fill in the blanks correctly.

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 327–329

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<sup>43</sup> Taken from *When I Don't Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#97. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers ,Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

## Day 2

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### DELIGHT YOURSELF IN GOD'S WORD

One of the central commands that this course has emphasized is Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the LORD”! But how are we to obey this command? How can we fight for joy?

Psalm 119:13–16, 35, 92–93, 111, 162, 174

<sup>13</sup> *With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. <sup>14</sup> In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. <sup>15</sup> I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. <sup>16</sup> I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.*

<sup>35</sup> *Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.*

<sup>92</sup> *If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.*

<sup>93</sup> *I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life.*

<sup>111</sup> *Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart.*

<sup>162</sup> *I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil.*

<sup>174</sup> *I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight.*

6. What is the testimony of the psalmist regarding God's Word and his joy? Why might his expressions of delight have been recorded for us to read?

- **ANSWER.** *The psalmist expresses his great delight in God's Word throughout Psalm 119. It seems as if his delight in God's Word motivates and sustains his life of obedience. The psalmist is meant to serve for us as a model of how one ought to study and cherish God's word. Psalm 119 is kindling for the affections of the Christian Hedonist.*

The next passage we will examine is simply mind-blowing if understood in all its fullness.

John 15:7–12

<sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. <sup>12</sup> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

7. Why might verse 11 be sandwiched between verse 10 and 12?

- **ANSWER.** *Jesus wants to make it clear that keeping his commands is not burdensome. Rather, there is great reward or satisfaction in doing so. The mind-blowing purpose of Jesus' instruction is that the joy of the God-man, Jesus Christ, might be in us! This promise becomes all the more staggering as we begin to comprehend the depth of the divine joy of Christ!*

As we learned in Day 4 of Lesson 6, God is honored not only in the full flower of joy, but also in the bud of anticipation and longing. Listen to Peter's exhortation:

1 Peter 1:22–2:3

<sup>22</sup> Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; <sup>24</sup> for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, <sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. <sup>1</sup> So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

8. What is the "pure spiritual milk" (2:2)? And how does verse 2 relate to verse 3?

- **ANSWER.** *The immediate context and the use of this illustration elsewhere (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12–13), suggests that the "milk" is the word of God. The logic in 2:2–3 seems to be that in their conversion, these brothers and sisters did taste that the Lord is good. This spiritual taste should cause them to crave more of the same. They are to hunger and thirst after the word of God.*

Here is another translation of verses 2 and 3:

1 Peter 2:2 (NASB)

<sup>2</sup> ... like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, <sup>3</sup> if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

And here are John Piper's comments:

*"Verses 2–3 say,*

*<sup>2</sup> Like newborn babes [who were born by the Word of God], long [the way babies do] for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, <sup>3</sup> if [that is, since!] you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*

*Do you see the connection between the intense longing or craving for the 'spiritual milk' in verse 2 and the tasting of the kindness of the Lord in verse 3? Put them together: 'Long for the spiritual milk, since you've tasted the kindness of the Lord.' So it seems to me that the milk is the milk of God's kindness. That is what we are commanded to long for. So which is it: the milk of the Word (NASB)? Or the milk of God's kindness?*

*But there doesn't have to be a contradiction. Where did the readers taste the kindness of the Lord? The answer is: in the gospel, the Word of God (v. 25). They were born again by that kindness through the Word of God. So the spiritual milk is the kindness of the Lord experienced through the Word of God. Or you could say, the spiritual milk is the Word of God revealing or transmitting the kindness of the Lord.*

*You were born again by that Word—namely, by the powerful kindness of God in that Word, and now go on longing for that Word and for the day-by-day experience—tasting—of the kindness of the Lord through his Word."*<sup>44</sup>

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 152–157

▷ start at "An Earnest Exhortation"

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<sup>44</sup> John Piper, "Long for the Pure Milk of the Word," an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

9. On page 154, John Piper repeats the idea that in order to wield the Word of God, we must wear it. Why might he emphasize this point by repeating it?

· **ANSWER.** *As Piper writes in his first mention of this idea (151), “many Christians fail to realize” that “we can’t draw the sword from someone else’s scabbard.” Although many Christians would probably assent to the idea that the Word of God is necessary for our joy of faith, they don’t take the practical steps of meditating on the Word of God or memorizing it so that it’s in them when they need it.*

10. Summarize George Müller’s exhortation (154–157) in your own words:

· **ANSWER.** *Müller exhorts us to obtain food for the inner man before doing anything else in the day. This is done by reading Scripture meditatively. In this way, we will be fit for prayer, preaching, service, or whatever the Lord gives us to do.*

## Day 3

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### READING THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

For many, the Old Testament seems removed and irrelevant to their fight of faith. This day's study will seek to strengthen your confidence in wielding the sword that is the Old Testament.

Romans 15:4

*<sup>4</sup> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

1 Corinthians 10:1–11

*<sup>1</sup> I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup> nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*

11. How do Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 (especially verses 6 and 11) relate?

- **ANSWER.** *The teaching of Romans and 1 Corinthians are two sides of the same coin. It could be said that the Scriptures were written to strengthen our hope; or, it could be said that they were written so that we might not sin. Whether with positive incentives or negative warnings, the Old Testament encourages a life of faith in future grace.*

The life of Old Testament believers—and more importantly, the God they served—is not so distant from us. Here is a concrete example of what we considered in Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–11.

Hebrews 11:24–26

<sup>24</sup> By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, <sup>25</sup> choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. <sup>26</sup> He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

12. According to this passage, how did Moses endure suffering?

- **ANSWER.** *Moses endured suffering by considering fellowship with God's people to be of greater value than enjoying the treasures of Egypt, which were "fleeting pleasures of sin." Moses, as an Old Testament saint, was living by faith in future grace. He was "looking to the reward" (v. 26).*

13. Does this passage have any implications for how we should read the Old Testament? Why or why not?

- **ANSWER.** *This passage encourages us to imitate the example of Moses' faith. So when reading through the Old Testament, we should understand that the Old Testament saints obeyed by faith in future grace, as we do now.*

Consider related exhortations from J. Ligon Duncan:

*"Paul said to Timothy, 'From childhood you have known the sacred writings [Old Testament Scriptures] which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15). It is the Old Testament, the apostle Paul says, that is able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith. Here in the Old Testament is sola fide. Therefore, we ought not be surprised that when Paul wants to prove the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, he goes to Genesis 15. If someone had asked*

*the apostle Paul, ‘Paul, are people saved in the old covenant like they are in the new covenant, you know, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?’ the apostle Paul would have said, ‘I don’t understand the question. The only question is, are they still saved the same way in the new covenant as they were in the old covenant? Because when I want to show you that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, I go to the old covenant Scriptures. I will start with Genesis 15, for example.’*

*... Very often as people urge us to preach redemptive historically and to preach christologically, they make fun of what they call exemplaristic or moralistic preaching. They say, ‘The Old Testament wasn’t given as a how-to guide for the Christian life. You are not to learn how to be a godly man from the story of Joseph. It is all about christology and redemptive history. You are not to learn moralistic messages and principles from these events, to pound the people of God with these lessons today.’*

*Now the problem with that assertion is it goes directly contrary to Jesus and Paul. Jesus will say, ‘Remember Lot’s wife’ (Luke 17:32). And the apostle Paul will say, ‘Now these things happened [he has just talked about the Exodus, crossing of the Red Sea] as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved’ (1 Corinthians 10:6). Someone needs to clue Paul in that he has a problem with moralistic teaching of the Old Testament, because Paul, happily, will take an Old Testament passage chock full of redemptive, historical, and christological significance and still see moral exhortation for Christians.”<sup>45</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 145–148

▷ stop at “Why Obedience So Often Aborted”

14. According to John Piper, what are the short- and long-term aims of the Law?

· **ANSWER.** *Piper maintains on page 139 that the short-term aim of the law is to increase not only the knowledge of sin, but sin itself (Romans 3:20; Romans 5:20). The long-term aim is found in Romans 10:4, or as Piper says, “the aim of the law was to bring people to Christ, who, through faith alone, would become our righteousness” (p 141).*

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<sup>45</sup> Taken from “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament” by J. Ligon Duncan, from *Preaching the Cross* © 2007 by Together for the Gospel, pp. 56, 63-64. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

15. After reading this chapter, what is one practical implication that you can apply to your own devotional reading of the Old Testament?

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 145–148

- ▷ start at “Why Obedience Aborted”
- ▷ stop at “All Old Testament Obedience Was by Faith in *Future Grace*”

## Day 4

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### READING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

As we read the New Testament, we must understand the basic difference between the Old Testament and the New. John Piper asserts, “The basic difference between the old covenant offered by God through the law and the new covenant offered by God through Christ is not that one had commandments and the other doesn’t. The basic difference is that in the old covenant the gracious enabling power to obey was not poured out as fully as it is since Jesus.”<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, in order to read the New Testament properly, we must understand how to read commands. Can we even read commands as a Christian Hedonist?

1 John 5:1–5

<sup>1</sup> Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has over-come the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

16. How do we overcome the world (5:4)? And how does verse 4 relate to the second sentence of verse 3?

- **ANSWER.** *There are three related concepts in these verses: being “born of God,” “faith,” and finding the commandments of God not burdensome. It appears as if faith is a result of being born of God (cf. 5:1) and true faith finds the commandments of God a delight and not a burden. So in keeping his commands with joy by believing, we overcome the world and the evil one.*

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46 Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.155-156, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

17. How does your previous answer relate to love for God?

- **ANSWER.** *If we have understood the connections correctly in the previous answer, then faith and love for God are parallel—we keep his commandments by faith, which is love for God. This implies that there is an “emotional” aspect in faith. Faith is not mental assent alone, but an “embracing” of God, a treasuring of God, a prizing of God. A Christian Hedonist embraces calls for faith out of love for God.*

Therefore, in reading the New Testament, a Christian Hedonist joyfully embraces the commands of God, knowing that God has provided the grace to obey and a reward for obedience. Ultimately, we read the Bible in a God-centered way when we realize that God himself is the great reward.

In this final question on the biblical texts, we will consider the mentality we ought to have as we approach God’s Word:

Proverbs 2:1–6

<sup>1</sup> My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, <sup>2</sup> making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; <sup>3</sup> yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, <sup>4</sup> if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, <sup>5</sup> then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding ...

18. Underline every word or phrase that describes our activity in relation to wisdom and the Word of God. How ought we to read our Bibles?

- **ANSWER.** *Our pursuit of wisdom and knowledge ought to be aggressive and relentless! It should be marked by delight, intentional effort, careful planning, eagerness, and determination. We ought also to recognize that it is God who gives wisdom. Therefore, we should read our Bibles in humility and dependence upon God.*

And this is one of the theme verses for the Bethlehem College & Seminary:

Psalm 111:2

<sup>2</sup> *Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.*

Here is how John Piper describes how our study of God’s word and our life of faith ought to be conducted:

*“This is how the truth of God’s Word sets us free. It gives us the weapon with which we kill deceitful desires. Just as Jesus spoke of violence in the battle against desire, so does Paul: ‘Put to death therefore what is earthly in you . . . evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry’ (Colossians 3:5). And in another place he says, ‘If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’ (Romans 8:13) . . . .*

*Both Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5 say, ‘Kill!’ This is mortal combat, and our lives—not to mention our joy—hang on it. Jesus and Paul agree: This is war. Christianity would look very different in many places if Christians pursued the joy of seeing God with this life-and-death seriousness and felt a deadly urgency in fighting the desires that deceive us and blind us to the all-satisfying glory of God.”<sup>47</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 155–162, 165

- ▷ stop at “Obedience For the Joy Set Before Us”
- ▷ start at “Who Keep the Commandments of God and Faith in Jesus”

19. Using this chapter, respond to the statement. “If God really loved me he wouldn’t command me to do things. Commands and love don’t mix.”

- **ANSWER.** *God remains loving even though he gives us commands, because his commands are for our good and he gives us the power of his Spirit so that we can obey by faith in future grace.*

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<sup>47</sup> Taken from *When I Don’t Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#104. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers ,Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

20. According to this chapter and the previous one, how should we read and understand the commandments of God?

- **ANSWER.** *The commandments of God should not be a burden to us. Rather, our joy is strengthened as we understand that God gives us the power to obey his commands by having faith in future grace.*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 162–165

- ▷ start at “Obedience For the Joy Set Before Us”
- ▷ stop at “Who Keep the Commandments of God and Faith in Jesus”



Here are some words of practical wisdom from John Piper on reading Scripture.

*“First, I would stress the importance of planning. ... Many good things do not happen in our lives for the simple lack of planning. ... Most Christians neglect their Bibles not out of conscious disloyalty to Jesus, but because of failure to plan a time and place and method to read it.”<sup>48</sup>*

In view of this exhortation, formulate your own plan for reading the Bible daily. If you already have a plan to do this, use this assignment to reflect on whether your plan has been effective and helpful. Let the following questions guide your written plan and reflections:

- ▷ During what part of the day will you have a fixed time to meet with God?
- ▷ Where will this be? Is it a place free from distractions?
- ▷ How will you read through your Bible? Do you have a specific reading plan to follow?
- ▷ What will you do to retain what you are reading and learning?
- ▷ How will you meditate on God’s Word throughout the day?
- ▷ How will you treasure his Word in your heart?
- ▷ How will you read in the Bible in a God-centered way?

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<sup>48</sup> Taken from *When I Don’t Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#116. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Review the following questions in preparation for discussion. Record any lingering questions that you may have after completing the lesson.

1. What does your time with God in his Word look like? If you could change one thing about it, what would you change?
2. Interact with this statement: “I believe that God wants me to find my joy in Him, but so often I don’t. To me, Christian Hedonism seems to be an unattainable ideal. What can I do?!”
3. Is there a sharp distinction between studying the Bible and reading the Bible devotionally? If so, what is the distinction?
4. Your own question(s):



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- ▷ John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, chapters 7 and 8
- ▷ *Why We Believe the Bible*, a TBI seminar at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)
- ▷ R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977).
- ▷ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).
- ▷ John Piper, "Good English With Minimal Translation: Why Bethlehem Uses the ESV," an online article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).



# Being God-Centered in Prayer

# 9

## Lesson Nine

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

Having studied the role of Scripture in the God-centered life, we now consider the role of prayer. The world is filled with prayer. Here are two Muslim prayers that are part of Salat:

*All our oral, physical and monetary ways of worship are only for Allah. Peace, mercy and blessing of Allah be on you, O Prophet. May peace be upon us and on the devout slaves of Allah. I testify that there is no God but Allah and I testify that Muhammad is His slave and messenger.*

*O God send your Mercy on Muhammad and his posterity as you sent Your mercy on Abraham and his posterity. You are the Most Praised, The Most Glorious. O God, send your Blessings on Muhammad and his posterity as you have blessed Abraham and his posterity. You are the Most praised, The Most Glorious.* <sup>49</sup>

And here is a Buddhist prayer:

*Oneness of Life and Light,  
Entrusting in your Great Compassion,  
May you shed the foolishness in myself,  
Transforming me into a conduit of Love.  
May I be a medicine for the sick and weary,  
Nursing their afflictions until they are cured;  
May I become food and drink,  
During time of famine,*

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<sup>49</sup> These prayers are cited from <http://www.islam-usa.com/pray7.html>, accessed July 26, 2007.

*May I protect the helpless and the poor,  
May I be a lamp,  
For those who need your Light,  
May I be a bed for those who need rest,  
and guide all seekers to the Other Shore.  
May all find happiness through my actions,  
and let no one suffer because of me.  
Whether they love or hate me,  
Whether they hurt or wrong me,  
May they all realize true entrusting,  
Through Other Power,  
and realize Supreme Nirvana.*<sup>50</sup>

Here are two Hindu prayers:

*We worship the three-eyed One (Lord Siva) Who is fragrant and Who nourishes well all beings; may He liberate us from death for the sake of immortality even as the cucumber is severed from its bondage (to the creeper).*

*I prostrate myself before the five-faced Lord of Parvati, who is adorned with various ornaments, who shines like the crystal jewel, who is seated peacefully in the lotus pose, with moon-crested crown, with three eyes, wearing trident, thunderbolt, sword and axe on the right side, who holds the serpent, noose, bell, damaru and spear on the left side, and who gives protection from all fear to His devotees.*<sup>51</sup>

Even people who are thoroughly “non-religious” will pray occasionally.

So what is distinctive about *Christian* prayer? More specifically, how and why will a Christian Hedonist pray? This lesson will explore the vital role that God has assigned for prayer in our joy and for his glory. We pray that your study of God’s Word in this lesson will help you answer these questions and encourage you to bring your requests before our generous, powerful God.

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<sup>50</sup> This prayer is cited from [http://buddhistfaith.tripod.com/pureland\\_sangha/id41.html](http://buddhistfaith.tripod.com/pureland_sangha/id41.html), accessed July 26, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> These prayers are cited from <http://hinduism.about.com/od/prayersmantras/a/5prayers.htm>, accessed July 26, 2007.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain how our joy relates to God's glory in prayer
- ▷ articulate the appropriate way in which we should "serve" God
- ▷ describe the tone that our prayers should have in the context of this sinful world



## TEACHING NOTES

A helpful question to pose to your students during the class discussion is “What do you pray for?” You might have to add “What do you pray for in private?” since sometimes (sadly) our public prayers do not reflect the desires of our hearts. How often do your students pray for health concerns? How often for financial provision? How often for obedient children? How often for more of God? Consider this challenge from John Piper in *When I Don't Desire God*,

*What a person prays for shows the spiritual condition of his heart. If we do not pray for spiritual things (like the glory of Christ, and the hallowing of God's name, and the salvation of sinners, and the holiness of our hearts, and the advance of the gospel, and contrition for sin, and the fullness of the Spirit, and the coming of the kingdom, and the joy of knowing Christ), then probably it is because we do not desire these things. Which is a devastating indictment of our hearts.*

*This is why J. I. Packer said, “I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face.” How we pray reveals the desires of our hearts. And the desires of our hearts reveal what our treasure is. And if our treasure is not Christ, we will perish. (139)*

Since this lesson concerns prayer and the previous lesson concerns Scripture, it might be helpful to spend some class time relating the two. Here is an attempt by John Piper, again in *When I Don't Desire God*:

*Prayer and meditation are inseparable in the fight for joy. This inseparability is rooted in God's design to make the Spirit of God and the Word of God inseparable. His purpose for our lives is that the work of his Spirit happen through his Word, and that the work of his Word happen through his Spirit. The Spirit and the Word are inseparable in wakening and sustaining joy, from the first act of regeneration to the final act of glorification. God works by the Spirit through his Word to glorify his Son and satisfy his people.*

*Prayer and meditation correspond to God's Spirit and God's Word. Prayer is our response to God in reliance on his Spirit; and meditation is our response to God in reliance on his Word.*

*... Thus, even as the Spirit and the Word are inseparable in our lives, so prayer and meditation are inseparable. The fight for joy always involves both. Prayer without meditation on the Word of God will disintegrate into humanistic spirituality. It will simply reflect our own fallen ideas and feelings—not God’s. And meditation, without the humility of desperate prayer, will create proud legalism or hopeless despair. (148, 149)*

If you have access to *When I Don’t Desire God*, consult Chapter 10 for many practical suggestions in how to grow in fellowship with God through prayer.

Finally, prayer and the sovereignty of God is not the main issue in this lesson, but could certainly be addressed if it is an obstacle for your students. We recommend “Prayer and Predestination” and “The Sovereignty of God and Prayer” as resources. They are both articles found at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org). In short, God ordains causes as well as effects. Therefore, he often ordains things as answers to prayer, which means they will only happen as he causes his people to pray for them.



## Day 1

### PURSUING GOD'S GLORY IN PRAYER

In everything the Christian Hedonist does, he or she strives to join God in the pursuit of God's glory and our joy. This God-centered approach permeates all of life. In this lesson, we will consider how it should permeate our prayer. Notice that, in contrast to the many prayers cited in the introduction, Christian prayer is offered in the name of Jesus.

John 14:13–14

<sup>13</sup> *Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* <sup>14</sup> *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.*

John 16:23–24

<sup>23</sup> *... Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.* <sup>24</sup> *Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*

1. Underline the purpose clause in each passage above. How do these two purpose clauses relate?  
  
· **ANSWER.** *The two purposes of prayer underlined above—God's glory and our joy—are not in competition. As we said before, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." In this case, the filling up of our joy in prayer is how God is glorified in us.*

Here is an important Old Testament text relating prayer to God's glory:

Psalm 50:14–15

<sup>14</sup> *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High,*  
<sup>15</sup> *and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*

2. Draw a diagram or otherwise visually represent the sequence narrated in verse 15:

- **ANSWER.** *Trouble comes → the needy psalmist calls upon God → the all-sufficient God delivers → the psalmist glorifies God for his power, compassion, and faithfulness. Prayer glorifies God's ability to provide us with what we need and what he alone can provide.*

3. What do these verses teach us about prayer?

- **ANSWER.** *Prayer is motivated by an awareness of our need and our belief that God alone can meet our need. Prayer should result in thanksgiving.*

*“Beware of a mindset that belittles and insults God. God is an absolutely unstoppable, unfailing, constant, volcano of power and fire and joy and help. He never wearies in the slightest and is omnipotently enthusiastic about his gracious purposes in your life. Never let a weak or miserly or tightfisted or weary or boring God enter your mind. He owns all and loves to glorify his power and grace by delivering people who call on him.”<sup>52</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 159–164

▷ stop at “Praying like an Adulteress”

4. According to John Piper, why do we not pray? Select the correct answer.
  - a) we are afraid to approach God's holiness
  - b) we are too busy thinking about our daily activities
  - c) we haven't been instructed how to pray
  - d) we don't know that God is generous and mighty

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52 John Piper, “Call upon Me in the Day of Trouble and I Will Deliver You,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

5. Why does Spurgeon call prayer a delightful partnership?

- **ANSWER.** *Spurgeon calls prayer this because it's a "win-win" arrangement: we get what we need, God gets glory. Or, as John Piper says, God "gets the glory precisely because He shows Himself full and strong to deliver us into joy. And we attain fullness of joy precisely because He is the all-glorious source and goal of life." (163)*

## Day 2

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### THE PRAYER OF AN ADULTERESS

Although prayer is meant to glorify God, it is possible to pray to God in a way that does not bring him glory. In this day's lesson we aim to expose sinful prayer for the sake of clarifying the kind of prayer that keeps God himself central.

James 4:2–5

<sup>2</sup> *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.* <sup>3</sup> *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* <sup>4</sup> *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* <sup>5</sup> *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?*

6. What kind of prayer, described in verse 3, is considered spiritual adultery? Why might that be an apt metaphor?

· **ANSWER.** *Prayer that asks God for things to satisfy our carnal lusts is adultery. It is not wrong to seek the satisfaction of our passions. But if we make God simply a means to fulfilling our passions with something else, then we have betrayed God by transferring our desires elsewhere. This is like a wife who uses her husband's resources to pursue an affair.*

The prayer of an adulteress seeks satisfaction in something other than God. The prayer of a Christian Hedonist, though, sounds like this:

Psalm 73:25–26

<sup>25</sup> *Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.* <sup>26</sup> *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

7. Why does a prayer like Psalm 73:25–26 glorify God?

- **ANSWER.** *This prayer glorifies God because it magnifies the worth of God by elevating it above everything else on earth. Even earthly life itself can be lost if we have the LORD as our portion forever. The sentiment here is very similar to David’s, “your steadfast love is better than life” (Psalm 63:3), or Paul’s, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). This makes God look really good!*

And here is another way not to pray.

Matthew 6:5–6

<sup>5</sup> *And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* <sup>6</sup> *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

8. What is the reward of a hypocrite’s prayer? And what is the reward of the faithful disciple’s prayer? How does the prayer of the faithful disciple glorify God?

- **ANSWER.** *The hypocrite will be rewarded with the esteem of man; the disciple, presumably, will be rewarded with esteem from God. By valuing God’s praise about the praise of man, the disciple magnifies the worth of God.*

**Required Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 133–138

▷ stop at “Why God Created a Material World”

9. Answer the question of the section title: “Can gratitude to God be idolatrous?” Why? Relate your answer to prayer.

- **ANSWER.** *Yes, gratitude to God can be idolatrous. Being thankful for answered prayer is only honoring to God if we are ultimately thankful for God himself. So, for example, though we might be overjoyed to receive physical healing through prayer, our gratitude is idolatrous if it arises primarily from our delight in health or freedom from pain rather than God.*

10. Respond to the following (fictitious) counseling scenario below. Is the counselor's response helpful or true?

Young man: "My life is so meaningless. I want to kill myself."

Counselor: "Your life is not meaningless! God showed us how valuable we are to him when he sent his Son to die for us. If God made such a sacrifice for you, why would you kill yourself?"

- **ANSWER.** *The response of the counselor is potentially misleading and harmful for a couple reasons. First, it sounds as if the counselor believes that the purpose of the cross was to magnify human worth (rather than the glory of God?). Second, the last sentence sounds like the "debtor's ethic" described in Day 2 of Lesson 5. A better response would point the man to pleasure in God rather than in suicide.*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 164–168

- ▷ start at "Praying like an Adulteress"
- ▷ stop at "Glorifying God Not by Serving Him, but by Being Served by Him"

## Day 3

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### DON'T SERVE GOD

This lesson will again attempt to explain why God is so glorified in our prayer. We begin with a consideration of God's nature.

Isaiah 46:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. <sup>2</sup> They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. <sup>3</sup> Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; <sup>4</sup> even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. <sup>5</sup> To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? <sup>6</sup> Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! <sup>7</sup> They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.

Isaiah 64:4

<sup>4</sup> From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.

11. According to these passages, what is an essential difference between God and idols? In view of your answer, why is God glorified in prayer?
  - **ANSWER.** *An essential difference between God and idols is that God is mighty to save while idols are powerless. Idols require their worshippers to work for them; God works for his worshippers, and answers prayer. Since this is the nature of the true God, prayer, which highlights our neediness and God's power, makes God known.*

The way in which we pray and live, then, must bear witness to the truth of Isaiah 64:4. The character of God is at stake.

Acts 17:22–25

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

12. How is Acts 17 similar to Isaiah 46 and 64:4? Can we “serve” God?

- **ANSWER.** *Paul, like Isaiah, was making the nature of the true God known over and against false gods. The creator God does not receive what he needs from humans, but provides “life and breath and everything” to humans. Therefore, we cannot and should not attempt to serve God in such a way that implies that we can meet deficiencies in God (which don’t exist).*

*“God aims to exalt Himself by working for those who wait for Him. Prayer is the essential activity of waiting for God—acknowledging our helplessness and His power, calling upon Him for help, seeking His counsel. Since His purpose in the world is to be exalted for His mercy, it is evident why prayer is so often commanded by God. Prayer is the antidote for the disease of self-confidence, which opposes God’s goal of getting glory by working for those who wait for Him.”<sup>53</sup>*

Is there any sense in which we serve God? Notice how Jesus uses the language of serving God in the following verse:

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<sup>53</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.170-171, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Matthew 6:24

<sup>24</sup> *No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*

13. How does one serve money? If serving God and serving money are parallel concepts, how does your answer clarify the way in which we serve God?

· **ANSWER.** *It's nonsensical to give to money something it's "lacking." Rather one serves money by craving it and doing anything to get it. Therefore, we serve God not by giving him something he lacks, but by having him be the controlling desire of all our actions.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 168–174

- ▷ start at “Glorifying God Not by Serving Him, but by Being Served by Him”
- ▷ stop at “Prayer as the Pursuit of Our Joy”

14. According to John Piper, what does God gladly receive from us?

· **ANSWER.** *As Piper says, “God will gladly receive anything from us that shows our dependence and His all-sufficiency” (171).*

15. Explain in your own words what it means to say that “the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments are the Doctor’s prescribed health regimen, not the employee’s job description.” (171)

· **ANSWER.** *When an employer gives an employee instruction, the employee works for the employer by doing something to benefit the employer. When a doctor gives a patient instruction, the patient “serves” the doctor by doing something that will benefit the patient. Therefore, in obeying God, we are not doing “work” for God that puts God in our debt. Rather, we are trusting the “health regimen” that the wise God has designed for our good and which exalts his wisdom and care for us.*

The particular thing that Piper mentions is our anxiety. But the quoted concept is certainly broad enough to include our cares, our decisions, our futures, and our worship. God receives our worship because worship is essentially a cry for more of God.

## Day 4

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### PURSUING OUR JOY IN PRAYER

This lesson has now come full circle. We began by asserting that we pray so that God might be glorified. We now assert that we pray so that our joy might be full (John 16:24).

John 15:7–8, 16–17

<sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. . . . <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. <sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

16. God is glorified when we bear fruit, abiding in Jesus as branches in a vine. How does bearing fruit relate to our joy?

- **ANSWER.** *The fruit we bear in God's power is a reflection of God's character. Disciples are like their masters. It is a joy for the disciple to bear fruit because the disciple takes great joy in the character and beauty of God reflected in their life.*

But hear this important qualification on what it means to pray for our joy.

*“Praying for joy is not the emotional pampering of joyless people. It is preparation for sacrifice. What’s at stake in the fight for joy is the radiance of the worth of Jesus made visible for the world to see in sacrifices of love flowing from the joy of blood-bought, soul-satisfied, Christ-exalting people. When Paul said to the Corinthians, ‘We work with you for your joy’ (2 Corinthians 1:24), he was not saying, ‘We pamper you.’ He was saying, ‘We prepare you for radical, Christ-exalting sacrifices of love.’”*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Taken from *When I Don't Desire God* by John Piper, © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation, pp.#140. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, [www.crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org).

Praying for joy is not to be equated with praying for earthly comforts! Remember what the prayer of an adulteress is. And also examine the testimony of Paul. Paul describes prayer in the context of spiritual warfare.

Ephesians 6:16–20

*<sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, <sup>19</sup> and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*

17. In this passage, for what does Paul ask believers to pray? Select the correct answer.
- a) his deliverance from prison
  - b) him to proclaim the gospel boldly in his suffering
  - c) his body to be healed of disease
  - d) God to provide financially for his ministry

It is essential to understand that praying for our joy is not a form of health-wealth-and-prosperity teaching.

Luke 21:34–36

*<sup>34</sup> But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup> For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.*

18. What should Luke 21:34–36 remind us?
- **ANSWER.** *Luke 21:34–36 reminds us of the dire context in which we pray. Consideration of temptation, suffering, and spiritual lethargy should make us sober-minded in our prayers.*

Throughout this course we have tried to stress that the pursuit of joy is a blood-earnest one. We stalk joy; we battle for it. Life is war and joy in God will not come in causal pursuit.

*“Probably the number one reason prayer malfunctions in the hands of believers is that we try to turn a wartime walkie-talkie into a domestic intercom. Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for. Prayer is for the accomplishment of a wartime mission ...*

*But what have millions of Christians done? We have stopped believing that we are in a war. No urgency, no watching, no vigilance. No strategic planning. Just easy peace and prosperity. And what did we do with the walkie-talkie? We tried to rig it up as an intercom in our houses and cabins and boats and cars—not to call in firepower for conflict with a mortal enemy but to ask for more comforts in the den.”<sup>55</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 174–179, 182–183

- ▷ start at “Prayer as the Pursuit of Our Joy
- ▷ stop at “The Final Joy of God’s People”
- ▷ start at “Summary and Exhortation”

19. Why does prayer lead to joy? Record John Piper’s two answers:

- **ANSWER.** *Prayer leads to joy by bringing us into delightful fellowship with Jesus and by providing the joy-producing power to love.*

20. The chapter ends with an earnest exhortation that is very similar to the exhortation that concluded the previous lesson on Scripture. We must be intentional in planning to pray. Record a brief, but specific, plan for how you will be devoted to prayer.

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 179–182

- ▷ start at “The Final Joy of God’s People”
- ▷ stop at “Summary and Exhortation”

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<sup>55</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010) 49. Used by permission.



#### INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

Compose a longer prayer—actually writing it down—concerning the things you have learned in this chapter. Write a prayer that God would be glorified in your dependence upon him, that your joy might overflow in prayerful communion with him, that your prayer requests would please him.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992).
- ▷ John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013).
- ▷ John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), chapter 2.
- ▷ Richard Pratt Jr., *Pray With Your Eyes Open* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1999).
- ▷ *Teach Us to Pray*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).
- ▷ Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons on Prayer* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

# Being God-Centered with Money

# 10

## Lesson Ten

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

Although you may be deceived about your priorities, your checkbook never is. One of the most direct and reliable ways of establishing what your priorities and values are is to examine how you spend your money. For as the Bible says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). In this lesson we will explore the relationship between money and Christian Hedonism. Consider these provocative quotes cited by Randy Alcorn:

*“One more revival—only one more—is needed, the revival of Christian stewardship, the consecration of the money power to God. When that revival comes, the Kingdom of God will come in a day.” —Horace Bushnell*

*“It is just as much a matter of discipline for a church member practically to deny his stewardship as to deny the divinity of Christ.” —Charles Finney<sup>56</sup>*

The issue of financial stewardship is one that is little addressed in the church today, though it was a constant theme of Jesus’ teaching. How can Christians spend their money in a way that honors God and brings them maximum happiness? How can Christians fight against the sin of greed and covetousness? These are extremely practical issues, but have eternal significance. So it is our prayer that God will open to you a world of greater joy and holiness as he enables you to loosen your grip on his money.

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<sup>56</sup> Both quotations appear as they are quoted on [https://www.epm.org/articles/steward\\_master.html](https://www.epm.org/articles/steward_master.html).

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ speak candidly about the dangers of materialism and greed
- ▷ explain how God can be honored in the use of our money
- ▷ freely discuss what God-centered stewardship should look like in their own life



An eye-opening, in-class exercise would be to calculate what percent of the total global church member annual income goes to the unreached, using the statistics provided in *Desiring God*. Then calculate how much money, on average, a church member would give to the unreached if they earned an income of \$50,000 a year.

Another eye-opening exercise might be to visit [globalrichlist.com](http://globalrichlist.com) and see where you rank in the world's money earners. Suggest to your students (the week before this lesson, if possible) that they visit this website and see where they stand among the world's money-earners prior to completing this lesson. It may be helpful to discuss the experience in class, asking the class what their response was to their results.

This lesson only briefly touches on how we ought to view “secular” employment. It might be helpful to generate discussion on this issue, since most of your students will probably earn their money working during the week at a place of secular employment. Here is the conclusion to John Piper's *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003). We recommend that you look at the entire eighth chapter.

*In conclusion, secular work is not a waste when we make much of Christ from 8 to 5. God's will in this age is that his people be scattered like salt and light in all legitimate vocations. His aim is to be known, because knowing him is life and joy. He does not call us out of the world. He does not remove the need to work. He does not destroy society and culture. Through his scattered saints he spreads a passion for his supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples. If you work like the world, you will waste your life, no matter how rich you get. But if your work creates a web of redemptive relationships and becomes an adornment for the Gospel of the glory of Christ, your satisfaction will last forever and God will be exalted in your joy. (154)*

For more discussion of the “wartime lifestyle,” see *Let the Nations Be Glad*, pages 102–107.





## Day 1

### DON'T ASPIRE TO BE RICH

The Bible is very blunt about money. James says, “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits” (James 1:9–11).

*“Since it is incomparably the greatest dignity to be introduced into the company of angels, nay, to be made the associates of Christ, he who estimates this favor of God aright, will regard all other things as worthless. Then neither poverty, nor contempt, nor nakedness, nor famine, nor thirst, will make his mind so anxious, but that he will sustain himself with this consolation, ‘Since the Lord has conferred on me the principal thing, it behooves me patiently to bear the loss of other things, which are inferior.’*

*Behold, how a lowly brother ought to glory in his elevation or exaltation; for if he be accepted of God, he has sufficient consolation in his adoption alone, so as not to grieve unduly for a less prosperous state of life.*

*...[James] bids [the rich] to glory in their lowness or littleness, in order to repress the haughtiness of those who are usually inflated with prosperity. But he calls it lowness, because the manifested kingdom of God ought to lead us to despise the world, as we know that all the things we previously greatly admired, are either nothing or very little things. For Christ, who is not a teacher except of babes, checks by his doctrine all the haughtiness of the flesh. Lest, then, the vain joy of the world should captivate the rich, they ought to habituate themselves to glory in the casting down of their carnal excellency.”<sup>57</sup>*

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57 John Calvin, “Commentaries on The Epistle of James” in Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 285–286.

So says the master commentator, John Calvin. Don't be captivated by a "vain joy"; be captivated by the Lord who has conferred upon us the "principal thing."

Now look at Paul's warning:

1 Timothy 6:3–11

<sup>3</sup> If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, <sup>4</sup> he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, <sup>5</sup> and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. <sup>6</sup> Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, <sup>7</sup> for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. <sup>8</sup> But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. <sup>9</sup> But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. <sup>11</sup> But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

1. Summarize the main point of these verses in your own words:

- **ANSWER.** Answers will vary. False teaching and the love of money leads to depravity and ruin. Therefore, one should pursue godliness with contentment, for in that is true gain.

2. Is it a sin to be rich? Underline verses that support your answer and explain.

- **ANSWER.** This passage does not denounce being rich, but the desire to be rich. If godliness becomes the means to earthly, financial gain, then it is sin. Being rich but generous is good.

*“When Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:10, ‘The love of money is the root of all evils,’ what did he mean? He didn’t mean that there’s a connection between every sinful attitude and money—that money is always in your mind when you sin. I think he meant that all the evils in the world come from a certain kind of heart, namely, the kind of heart that loves money.*

*Now what does it mean to love money? It doesn’t mean to admire the green paper or the brown coins. To know what it means to love money you have to ask, What is money? I would answer that question like this: Money is simply a symbol that stands for human resources. Money stands for what you can get from man (not from God! ‘Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. He who has NO MONEY come buy and eat!’ Isaiah 55:1). Money is the currency of human resources.*

*So the heart that loves money is a heart that pins its hopes, and pursues its pleasures, and puts its trust in what human resources can offer. So the love of money is virtually the same as faith in money—belief (trust, confidence, assurance) that money will meet your needs and make you happy.”<sup>58</sup>*

Here is instruction about the love of money from the author to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 13:5–6

*<sup>5</sup> Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”<sup>6</sup> So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”*

3. The author of the letter to the Hebrews quotes two Old Testament texts in verses 5 and 6. How do these two Old Testament quotations support the two commands in verse 5? Then, using these verses, explain why the love of money is evil.
- **ANSWER.** *God’s abiding presence and help allows us to be satisfied with what we have, and satisfaction in him kills the craving for money and human security. The love of money causes us not to be content in what we have and God’s provision of himself. Therefore it is evil because it elevates the worth of money (and the world) above God’s worth.*

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<sup>58</sup> John Piper, “Battling Unbelief at Bethlehem,” an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 185–192

▷ stop at “What Should the Rich Do?”

4. John Piper gives three illustrations about the absurdity of pursuing riches (188–191). Create an illustration of your own that illustrates the same point:

· **ANSWER.** *A man hoarding riches is like a farmer who frantically gathers more and more seed, but plants none of it in the ground to grow. Soon enough the seed will be rotted and worthless. The foolish farmer has not understood that the only lasting benefit that the seed can bring only comes when he scatters it far and wide.*

5. List the three reasons John Piper gives for why simplicity is possible and good:

· **ANSWER.** *Being content in simplicity is possible because 1) God’s presence is better than money, 2) his free gifts in nature and relationships are more satisfying than what money can buy, and 3) because investing in missions is full of joy and makes an eternal impact.*

## Day 2

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### WHAT SHOULD THE RICH DO?

If material riches are such a spiritual danger that we ignore to our own peril, then what are we to do? Should we give all our money away? Here is Paul's counsel:

1 Timothy 6:17–19

*<sup>17</sup> As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup> They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, <sup>19</sup> thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.*

This is what Luke urges us to do:

Luke 12:33

*<sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.*

Notice the third underlined command! Here is the immediate context of Luke 12:33.

Luke 12:32–34

*<sup>32</sup> Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

6. What is the relationship of verse 32 and verse 34 to verse 33? Explain.

- **ANSWER.** Verses 32 and 34 both “ground,” or provide rationale, for the action commanded in verse 33. We can sell our possessions because the Father will give us the kingdom, which is worth far more than all our possessions. We must also realize that what we do with our possessions indicates where our heart is.

A couple chapters later, Luke says this:

Luke 14:13–14

<sup>13</sup> *But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,* <sup>14</sup> *and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.*

7. According to these verses, what is the explicit motivation for giving a feast? Select the correct answer.
- a) to present the gospel to the disadvantaged
  - b) to be blessed in the future
  - c) to prove the sincerity of your faith
  - d) to show compassion as the “right thing to do”

A Christian Hedonist is freed for a life of generous giving by remembering the words of Jesus:

Luke 12:15

<sup>15</sup> *And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

8. Rewrite this verse so that a five-year-old child could understand it:
- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary. One example might be: “Jesus teaches us that we shouldn’t always want what other people have because having all the toys in the world won’t make your life more happy.”*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 192–197

- ▷ start at “What Should the Rich Do?”
- ▷ stop at “Is This a Health–Wealth–and–Prosperity Teaching?”

9. Is the brief section entitled “Luring Others to the Reward by Loving It Ourselves” related to anything else you have read in *Desiring God*? If so, what is it related to and how?

· **ANSWER.** *This section is closely related to Desiring God, pages 137–139, because both sections assert that a Christian’s love is not a sham if their delight in acts of love springs from the act of loving itself and not from the prospect of an unrelated heavenly reward. The love and the hoped-for reward must be “organically related.”*

10. Have you heard much teaching on money—how Christians should think about it and what they should do with it? Did this teaching include the idea of heavenly reward?

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

## Day 3

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### BE RICH IN GOOD DEEDS

This lesson will continue to answer the question, “What should the rich do?” Asked another way, the question is, “How can we be God-centered in our thinking and use of money?”

2 Corinthians 9:6–11

<sup>6</sup> The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

<sup>10</sup> He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

11. What supports and incentives does Paul offer for generous giving?

- **ANSWER.** Paul motivates the Corinthians by promising bountiful reaping for bountiful sowing (9:6) and says later that they will be “enriched in every way” (9:11) for their giving. He then assures the Corinthians that God is “able to make all grace abound” to them (9:8) and then that God supplies and multiplies their seed (9:10). Their giving will result in thanksgiving to God (9:11). Theology drives generosity!

How does Paul think about work?

Ephesians 4:28

<sup>28</sup> *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*

12. Which statement best represents Paul's philosophy of work? Select the correct answer.
- a) steal in order to get
  - b) work in order to get
  - c) work in order to get in order to give
  - d) work in order not to steal

See Teacher's Notes for more discussion topics and resources regarding secular vocation.

Matthew 6:2-4

<sup>2</sup> *Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* <sup>3</sup> *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,* <sup>4</sup> *so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

13. Is it possible to give generously and displease God? What does the passage above indicate? What matters most in giving?

- **ANSWER.** *As the passage suggests, a hypocrite can give money in the name of God and yet receive no reward from God. What matters, as with prayer, is the motive one has in their giving: is the motive to win the praise of men? Matthew 6:2-4 should be a sober warning to all Christians.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 197-203

- ▷ start at "Is This a Health-Wealth-and-Prosperty Teaching?"

14. In your opinion, is an ungodly asceticism (forsaking material goods) or materialism (hoarding material goods) a bigger problem in the church today? Which is the greater temptation in your life?

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

Remember to read this section aloud so that your students can fill in the blanks left in the Student Workbook.

15. Fill-in-the-blank: “Do not desire to be rich, be content with the wartime necessities of life, set your hope fully on God, guard yourself from pride, and let your joy in God overflow in a wealth of liberality to a lost and needy world.” (203)

## Day 4

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### KILLING COVETOUSNESS

We have seen that the pursuit of riches or greed can be deadly. We must not think it a small thing when money is pursued with greater intensity than God is.

How, then, can we put greed to death?

<sup>1</sup> Timothy 6:9–12

*<sup>9</sup> But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.*

*<sup>11</sup> But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. <sup>12</sup> Fight the good fight of the faith.*

16. How does verse 12 relate to the rest of the above passage?

- **ANSWER.** *Verse 12 makes it clear that the fight against covetousness is a fight for faith. When people crave money and the pleasure money promises, they wander away from faith in God. The antidote to greed is not sheer willpower or the deadening of our desires for pleasure, but faith in the superior value of God.*

Occasionally Paul had to combat charges that he was “in it for the money.” How does he do that?

Philippians 4:10–19

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>15</sup> And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

17. Paul wants to thank the Philippians for their gift but make it clear that his joy was not in the money itself. How does he do this?

· **ANSWER.** *He does this by declaring that he is content with or without money (vv. 11–12), that he desires blessing for the Philippians (v. 17), and that the Philippians gift is acceptable first and foremost to God (v. 18).*

18. How might you follow Paul's example in thanking people for the gifts they give you? Think of a specific situation in your life.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 221–228

▷ start at “What Is Covetousness?”

19. Record John Piper’s definition of covetousness. Then, to which other commandment does John Piper compare the tenth commandment? How might this help you fight against the sin of covetousness?

· **ANSWER.** *Covetousness is desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God. John Piper compares the tenth commandment to the first. This alerts us to the fact that whatever we covet is what we are worshipping as “god.” Sin is thereby exposed.*

20. Record one thing that struck you in John Piper’s discussion of Philippians 4.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 219–221

▷ stop at “What Is Covetousness?”

This section is an excellent summary of the central concerns of the book. We commend it to you by way of review.



## INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

If you keep a monthly budget, look at the most recent month to determine where your priorities are. If you don't keep a budget, how are you stewarding your finances? What might you do to kill greed in your life? How might you bring up the topic of money with other believers? Record your reflections below.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003).
- ▷ Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle: Unlocking the Secret of Joyful Giving*. (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2005).
- ▷ John Piper, “The Eye is the Lamp of the Body” and “What is the ‘Bad Eye’ in Matthew 6:23,” online articles at the Desiring God website
- ▷ John Piper with Jon Bloom, “Money, Markets, and Ministry: Giving and Selling in the Mission of Desiring God,” an online article at the Desiring God website
- ▷ Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003).
- ▷ *Money, Ministry, and the Magnificence of Christ*, the 2004 Desiring God Conference for Pastors, available at the Desiring God website
- ▷ Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2001).

# Being God-Centered in Suffering

# 11

## Lesson Eleven

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### 🔗 INTRODUCTION

A course about joy in the Christian life must arrive, sooner or later, at the topic of suffering. Does the biblical call to suffering undo everything we've asserted about the pursuit of joy? We don't think so. There is such a thing as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Listen to the testimony of John Piper as he introduces a sermon on 1 Peter:

*It might seem strange to you that 1 Peter is one of my favorite biblical books—since it's mostly about suffering and how to live in a hostile culture, while I am a card-carrying, full-blooded, unwavering Christian Hedonist. But it isn't strange for people who have lived long enough to realize what Paul Brand, the missionary surgeon to India wrote in his book: *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants*.*

*I have come to see that pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined. Nearly all my memories of acute happiness, in fact, involve some element of pain or struggle. (Christianity Today, Jan. 10, 1994, p. 21)*

*I have never heard anyone say, 'The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort.' Nobody says that. It isn't true. What's true is what Samuel Rutherford said when he was put in the cellars of affliction: 'The Great King keeps his wine there'—not in the courtyard where the sun shines. What's true is what Charles Spurgeon said: 'They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.'*

*Christian Hedonists will do anything to have the King's wine and the rare pearls— even go to the cellars of suffering and dive in the sea of affliction.*<sup>59</sup>

This lesson will assert that suffering is an anticipated experience in the Christian life and an integral part of God's plan. We will also assert that the biblical call to suffering does not invalidate our pursuit of joy in God.

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain why the Christian life should be pitiable without the resurrection
- ▷ list God's purposes in the suffering of his people
- ▷ explain how suffering fits together with the vision of Christian Hedonism

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<sup>59</sup> John Piper, "Why We Can Rejoice in Suffering," an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).



This lesson focuses primarily on the suffering of Paul and how his suffering connects to our own experience. A more powerful and fundamental connection, however, is how the suffering of Christ is related to our suffering. This topic might be something to explore in the class discussion. Here is a pair of important passages in this regard:

#### 1 Peter 2:19–21

*<sup>19</sup> For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.*

#### John 15:18–20

*<sup>18</sup> If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: “a servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

Jesus’ suffering does not mean that we don’t have to suffer at all; rather, Jesus’ suffering is the basis and example for our suffering. If you spend some time on this issue, though, ensure that your students understand that our suffering is not identical to Jesus’ suffering in all respects: our suffering has no value in the cleansing of sin. You will want to make clear that God does not appoint suffering in our life as a punishment for our sin. Jesus fully absorbed our punishment in his death. Therefore, the pain we experience for our ongoing sin is part of the loving discipline of God that is meant to enlarge our capacity to enjoy his glory, to increase our holiness and faith, and to encourage boldness in others.

During class you might want to compare the following two statements Piper makes about our suffering and the mission of love to which we are called:

*“God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of His people.” (Desiring God, 269)*

*“Another of God’s designs for suffering is that it magnifies Christ’s worth and power. This is grace, because the greatest joy of Christians is to see Christ magnified in our lives.” (Future Grace, 349)*

John Piper shares a number of missionary stories in *Desiring God*. Why does he do this? Piper uses stories of faithful, suffering saints throughout his writing to illustrate biblical truth and inspire us. Therefore, you might want to focus some of the in-class discussion on these stories. In this regard, encourage your students to follow *Voice of the Martyrs* on social media, or sign up for email updates and newsletters at [persecution.com](http://persecution.com).



## Day 1

### CHOOSE SUFFERING

Jesus' words, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 24:27), have sometimes fallen on deaf ears in Western culture. But certainly Paul understood what Jesus was saying.

1 Corinthians 15:16–19

*<sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

1. Draw the flow of Paul's argument in this passage, starting with the proposition that the dead are not raised:
  - **ANSWER.** *If the dead are not raised (but they are!) → Christ not raised → the dead in Christ have perished and we are still in sin → faith is futile → we are to be most pitied. The falsity of the resurrection would make the Christian life most pitiable.*
  
2. Why might Paul say that "if in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19)? What would make this statement true?
  - **ANSWER.** *This statement would be true only if Paul's life was full of so much suffering and sacrifice, that if there was no life after death, his life would be utterly foolish and wasted.*

Paul's immense suffering—which made his life utterly pitiable if there was no resurrection—is well documented in the New Testament:

2 Corinthians 11:23–27

*<sup>23</sup> Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. <sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*

*“Lest we pass over this too quickly, without having the breath knocked out of us, consider what it meant to receive ‘forty lashes less one.’ It meant that he was stripped and tied to some kind of stake so that he would not run or fall. Then a person trained in flogging would take a whip, maybe with or without shards in the leather, and lash Paul’s back thirty-nine times. Halfway through, or earlier perhaps, the skin would probably begin to break and tear. By the end, parts of Paul’s back would be like jelly. The lacerations would not be clean, as with a razor blade. The skin would be torn and shredded, so that healing would be slow and perhaps complicated by infection. They knew nothing of sterilization in those days and had no antiseptics. It would take perhaps months before his garments could hang on his back without pain. Now, with that in view, consider that this happened again a second time on the same back, opening all the scars. It healed more slowly the second time. Then consider that some months later it happened a third time. Imagine what his back must have looked like. Then it happened again. And finally it happened a fifth time. And this was just one of Paul’s sufferings.”<sup>60</sup>*

In addition, examine the following passage, which confirms that Paul’s life would be pitiable if there were no resurrection from the dead because it was filled with so much danger and suffering.

1 Corinthians 15:30–32

*<sup>30</sup> Why am I in danger every hour? <sup>31</sup> I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! <sup>32</sup> What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”*

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60 John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010) 84. Used by permission.

3. Describe the kind of lifestyle you think is implied in Paul's statement: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

· **ANSWER.** *This probably does not refer to gluttony or debauchery. Rather, it implies a life of enjoying the simple pleasures, avoiding suffering and danger (unlike Paul), and focusing on the present life. (Compare Desiring God, page 260 and following.)*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 253–256, 260–262

- ▷ stop at "Is There a Difference between Conflict and Cancer?"
- ▷ start at "Is Gluttony the Alternative to Resurrection?"
- ▷ stop at "Why? Why Does He Do It?"

4. Describe the kind of life that many professing Christians aim for, but Paul rejects.

· **ANSWER.** *Paul rejects a normal, comfortable life of ordinary pleasures that avoids extraordinary suffering and troubling thoughts of heaven and hell.*

5. Fill-in-the-blank:

"I say it again: The call of Christ is a call to live a life of sacrifice and loss and suffering—a life that would be foolish to live if there were no resurrection from the dead." (262)

Remember to read this section aloud so that the students can fill in the blanks correctly.

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 256–260

- ▷ start at "Is There a Difference between Conflict and Cancer?"
- ▷ stop at "Is Gluttony the Alternative to Resurrection?"

## Day 2

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### WHY SUFFER?

Should 1 Corinthians 15:19 be true of us as well? Or is Paul's suffering unique to his calling?

2 Timothy 3:10–13

<sup>10</sup> You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, <sup>11</sup> my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra – which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. <sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup> while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

6. Complete this sentence: “2 Timothy 3:10–13 could be used as biblical evidence that ...

- **ANSWER.** ... persecutions and sufferings for following Christ were not limited to Paul or Timothy alone, but are the calling of all who desire to live a godly life in Christ.”

7. Rewrite 2 Timothy 3:12 so that a five-year-old child could understand it:

- **ANSWER.** Everyone who wants to be like Jesus in this evil world will be teased or hurt by people who don't love God. Someday God will ask you to suffer for following him.

In considering whether all Christians, and not just Paul and the apostles, might be called to a life of suffering (to some degree), consider God's purposes in Paul's suffering. Are these purposes that God wants to accomplish in our lives as well? Could he accomplish these purposes without suffering?

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

8. Is Paul a masochist—one who delights in suffering and pain? If not, explain the main point of the passage.

- **ANSWER.** *Paul is not a masochist; he does not delight in pain in and of itself. Rather, Paul wants God’s power to rest on him. Therefore, because God has chosen his power to come upon those who suffer for his sake, Paul is content in his suffering.*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 262–267

- ▷ start at “Why? Why Does He Do It?”
- ▷ stop at “The Unspeakable Words of Christian Suffering”

9. According to this section, list some reasons why Paul would choose a life of suffering:

- **ANSWER.** *Paul would choose a life of suffering 1) in obedience to Christ’s commission; 2) to confirm that he was a faithful disciple of Jesus; and 3) to magnify the all-sufficient grace of Christ. And we will see in the next section that Paul chooses a life of suffering in order to testify to Christ’s suffering and love.*

10. What evidence does Piper produce that the suffering described in the New Testament was not simply restricted to Paul or the apostles?

· **ANSWER.** *Piper's evidence is in a number of biblical texts including Philippians 1:29, Luke 9:23–24, John 15:20, Luke 10:3, Luke 21:16–17, Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12, and 1 Corinthians 4:16 (another important verse!) The verses in the Gospels extend beyond the original disciples because Jesus' teaching is meant for all those who follow him.*

**Further Reading:** *God Is the Gospel*, pages 125–129

- ▷ start at “All Things Are Yours, Including Death”
- ▷ stop at “Faith Tastes What Is Christ–Exalting and Embraces It”

## Day 3

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### COMPLETING THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST

One of the most provocative statements Paul makes about his suffering is in Colossians 1:24. What could this verse mean?

Colossians 1:24–26

*<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.*

11. What lack is there in Christ's afflictions that Paul must fill up?

- **ANSWER.** *As Piper will argue, there is no lacking in the atoning efficacy of Christ's afflictions. His suffering and death completely paid the penalty for our sins. What was lacking, however, was the embodiment and personal presentation of the sufferings of Christ to nations who had not yet heard the gospel. Christ's afflictions were not widely witnessed in the world and Paul's suffering made them known.*

In order to answer the previous question, a helpful parallel to notice is in Philippians 2:30. In the original language the phrase “filling up what is lacking” in Colossians 1:24 is very similar to “complete what was lacking” in Philippians 2:30. Philippians 2:30 is, in fact, the closest parallel and a vital clue in interpreting the troubling phrase in Colossians 1:24.

Philippians 2:25–30

*<sup>25</sup> I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, <sup>26</sup> for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on*

him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. <sup>29</sup> So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, <sup>30</sup> for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

12. How might the parallel of Philippians 2:30 help us interpret Colossians 1:24?

- **ANSWER.** *It is very likely that Epaphroditus brought a financial gift from the Philippian church (cf. Phil 4:15–18). The gift was already complete in itself before Epaphroditus left, but what was lacking was the personal presentation of the gift. The gift needed to travel from the Philippians to Paul and Epaphroditus was the one who accomplished this, though it nearly cost him his life. In a similar way, the message of Christ’s afflictions needed to be presented to the Gentiles and Paul did this through his own suffering.*

Here is yet one more passage about Paul’s sufferings:

2 Corinthians 4:7–12

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.

13. Underline all the reasons Paul gives for his sufferings in the verses above. According to these verses, how would you describe Paul's life as a Christian? Select the correct answer.

- a) Paul suffered greatly, but God was glorified and others were helped.
- b) God was glorified as Paul lived a life of triumph, strength, and prosperity.
- c) Paul was ashamed of his many sufferings, but knew that they were needed.
- d) Paul was a weak, sick, and mentally disturbed individual.

Paul's experience, and the biblical passages we've studied, makes those who say that healing is always possible for those who have enough faith sound like a sham. In this life, God will often choose not to heal his people or stop the suffering they are enduring.

*"The thing that distresses me most about those who say Christians should always be miraculously healed is that they give the impression that the quality of faith can only be measured by whether a miracle of physical healing takes place, whereas in much of the New Testament you get the impression that the quality of our faith is reflected in the joy and confidence we maintain in God through suffering."<sup>61</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 267–271, 279–280

- ▷ start at "The Unspeakable Words of Christian Suffering"
- ▷ stop at "How Can I Blaspheme My King Who Saved Me?"
- ▷ start at "Choosing to Suffer for the Sake of Nations"
- ▷ stop at "But Is This Christian Hedonism?"

14. Fill-in-the-blank:

"God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of His people." (269)

Remember to read this section aloud so that the students can fill in the blanks correctly.

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61 John Piper, "Christ and Cancer," an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

15. What does Revelation 6:11 contribute to our understanding of suffering (compare *Desiring God*, pages 272–273)?

- **ANSWER.** *This verse teaches us that God has planned to accomplish his purposes by appointing a specific number of martyrs. Once that number is reached, the end will come.*

**Further Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 271–279

- ▷ start at “How Can I Blaspheme My King Who Saved Me?”
- ▷ stop at “Choosing to Suffer for the Sake of Nations”

See also the final paragraph in this lesson’s Teaching Notes.

This section includes a number of compelling stories about real believers who have suffered for their faith in Jesus.

## Day 4

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### IS THIS CHRISTIAN HEDONISM?

In the previous days, our goal has been to demonstrate that all believers are called to some measure of suffering in this life. Suffering faithfully brings great glory to God and is a means by which the gospel message spreads to others.

But perhaps for some this teaching on suffering presents a dilemma: Which should we choose? Shall we embrace a life of suffering or should we pursue our joy?

Acts 14:21–22

<sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

16. How do the three phrases in verse 22 (marked off by commas) relate to one another? Must we choose between suffering and joy?

- **ANSWER.** *One's soul is probably strengthened by encouragement to continue in the faith. One form of encouragement is to say: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." In saying this, the disciples are taught to expect tribulations, but are made to understand that the joy of entering the kingdom of God is worth all the tribulations that might come. Choosing God as our final and everlasting joy will entail suffering in this life, so we do not need to choose in this life.*

Consider also the following exhortation:

Hebrews 13:12–14

<sup>12</sup> So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

See Teaching Notes for suggestions for digging deeper into the suffering of Jesus.

17. How does verse 13 relate to verse 12? How does verse 14 relate to verse 13?

- **ANSWER.** *Jesus' suffering and his work of sanctification is the basis for our own suffering. It enables us to be like him. The promise of a heavenly city for the righteous motivates us to suffer for Jesus in this present life and world.*

18. Paraphrase these verses in your own words:

- **ANSWER.** *Christians, let us suffer as Jesus did! He has already suffered for our sanctification; so as we suffer for the sake of his name we exult him as the one who will bring us into an eternal, heavenly city.*

*"We in America need to learn what Christians in most of the world can't help but learn, namely, when Jesus calls us to himself, he calls us to suffer. Romans 8:16–17 says, 'The Spirit himself bears witness that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.'*

*Paul said to the new churches he was starting (Acts 14:22), 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom.'*

*And the reason this is so is not just because tribulations often find us inside the camp, but because being a Christian means going outside the camp where even more tribulations are. It may mean choosing places to live, places to work, places to minister, places to travel, people to help, ministries to do that are not safe from abuse and reproach."<sup>62</sup>*

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 280–288

▷ start at "But Is This Christian Hedonism?"

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62 John Piper, "Christ and Cancer," an online sermon at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)

19. Skim pages 129–136 of *Desiring God* if you haven't read them already. How does this lesson on suffering relate to what is said there?

- **ANSWER.** *This section, listed in the Further Reading of Day 3 of Lesson 7, anticipates what we have studied here. "Love suffers for joy," because sometimes love must embrace a reward that can only come through suffering. "The gain outweighs the pain" (129).*

20. After reading the end of this chapter, record your own reflections on the relationship between suffering and Christian Hedonism:

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Further Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 341–350



#### INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

Write a letter to a Christian who is suffering for their faith in Jesus by visiting The Voice of the Martyrs Prisoner Alert website ([prisoneralert.com](http://prisoneralert.com)). Include encouragement that reflects what you have learned in this lesson.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ John Piper, “Embracing the Pain of Shame,” an online article at the Desiring God website
- ▷ John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001).
- ▷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
- ▷ *Suffering for the Sake of the Body*, a TBI Seminar at the Desiring God website
- ▷ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Bartlesville, Okla.: Living Sacrifice, 1998).

# The God-Centered Vision of Jonathan Edwards

# 12

## Lesson Twelve

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### § INTRODUCTION

John Piper happily confesses that “it is no secret, from what I have written elsewhere, that I am deeply indebted to Jonathan Edwards in the development of my understanding of God and life” (*Future Grace*, 387). If this course is simply a little tugboat that pulls Edwards’ work into the ocean of your thought, then our efforts will have proven worthwhile. Few have ever lived a life as radically centered on God as Jonathan Edwards has. There is much to learn from this rural pastor of three centuries past. This lesson is meant to give you a little taste of the sweetness and richness of Edwards’ vision of God. We highly recommend that after this course you allow Edwards to take you, as if by the hand, and lead you through his explorations of God’s Word and God’s all-surpassing glory.

### § LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain how Edwards’ theology relates to Christian Hedonism
- ▷ summarize how Edwards’ thought relates the sovereignty of God to evil
- ▷ testify to the value of carefully reading Edwards



Since this is the last lesson of God-Centered Living, it might be appropriate to spend about 30 minutes at the end of class either discussing any remaining questions or discussing ways in which the students' view of God has changed over the semester. Either of these options might help draw things together in their minds and give them a sense of closure.

If you want to ground the discussion more explicitly in the biblical text, you could cover the following two passages, which imply that every person has a love for their own happiness:

*Matthew 19:19*

*<sup>19</sup> ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

*Ephesians 5:28–30*

*<sup>28</sup> In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body.*

With regard to the first text (Matt 19:19), there is a very helpful sermon at the Desiring God website entitled, “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself, Part 2.” Here are a few key excerpts:

*“Love your neighbor as yourself” is a very radical command. What I mean by “radical” is this: it cuts to the root of our sinfulness and exposes it and, by God’s grace, severs it. The root of our sinfulness is the desire for our own happiness apart from God and apart from the happiness of others in God. Let me say it again: the root of our sinfulness is the desire to be happy apart from God and apart from the happiness of others in God. All sin comes from a desire to be happy cut off from glory of God and cut off from the good of others. The command of Jesus cuts to this root, exposes it, and severs it.*

*... Jesus says in effect: I start with your inborn, deep, defining human trait—your love for yourself. This is a given. I don’t command it; I assume it. All of you have a powerful instinct of self-preservation and self-fulfillment. You all want to be happy. You all want to live and to live with satisfaction. You want food for yourself. You*

*want clothes for yourself. You want a place to live for yourself. You want protection from violence against yourself. You want meaningful or pleasant activity to fill your days. You want some friends to like you and spend some time with you. You want your life to count in some way. All this is self-love. Self-love is the deep longing to diminish pain and to increase happiness. That's what Jesus starts with when he says, "as yourself."*

*... Now Jesus says, I start with this self-love. This is what I know about you. This is common to all people. You don't have to learn it. It comes with your humanity. My Father created it. In and of itself it is good. To hunger for food is not evil. To want to be warm in the winter is not evil. To want to be safe in a crisis is not evil. To want to be healthy during a plague is not evil. To want to be liked by others is not evil. To want your life to count in some significant way is not evil. This was a defining human trait before the fall of man into sin, and it is not evil in itself.*

Piper's radical conclusion, then, is that the command to love your neighbor as yourself is a command to "make your self-seeking the measure of your self-giving"! Piper later says, "In other words, Jesus is not just saying: seek for your neighbor the same things you seek for yourself, but also seek them in the same way—the same zeal and energy and creativity and perseverance." This insight has so much potential for application!

We encourage you not only to clarify what Christian Hedonism is, but also to commend it as biblical teaching. Remember, the students will be drawn, by God's grace, to the God-centered vision of this course as they see the delight and conviction with which you present it.



## Day 1

### THE GHOST OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

In this last lesson, we will modify our format somewhat. Instead of doing inductive study of biblical texts before coming to the required reading, we will invest more time in the reading itself. Hopefully this will allow you to read much more slowly while still spending approximately the same amount of time in preparation.

Why will it be necessary to read more slowly?

*“Good counsel tells me to alert the reader that what is coming may be heavy sledding. We are not used to reading material that is two centuries old, from a thought-world foreign to our day. Yet, as I said before: raking is easy, but you get only leaves; digging is hard, but you might find diamonds. That is what I found in a great eighteenth century pastor and theologian.”*<sup>63</sup>

Piper’s warning here is reminiscent of the warning John Owen gave his readers before plunging into the body of his work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.

*“Even [Owen] knows his work is difficult. In the Preface (‘To the Reader’) of *The Death of Death* Owen does what no good marketing agent would allow today. He begins like this: ‘READER ... If thou art, as many in this pretending age, a sign or title gazer, and comest into books as Cato into the theatre, to go out again,—thou hast had thy entertainment; farewell!’ (X, 149).”*<sup>64</sup>

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63 Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.387, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

64 John Piper, “The Chief Design of My Life: Mortification and Universal Holiness,” an online biography (of John Owen) at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

So please consider yourself warned. Truly comprehending the multiple quotations from Edwards will take time and effort. But there are many precious insights to be gathered.

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 385–387

▷ stop at “The Debt I Owe to Jonathan Edwards”

1. Piper summarizes much of this book in these opening pages. Did you learn anything new in this summary? If so, what? If not, what was a good reminder?

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 387–391

▷ start at “The Debt I Owe to Jonathan Edwards”

▷ stop at “Edwards’ Positive Treatment of Self-Love”

2. What objection is Piper responding to in this section? What is Piper’s basic response to this objection?

· **ANSWER.** *Piper is responding to the objection that Edwards was not a Christian Hedonist because he spoke critically of “self-love.” In this section, Piper labors to demonstrate that Edwards usually meant something other than “man’s love for his own happiness” by the term. In so doing, Piper wants to show that his own thought is fully compatible with Edwards’.*

3. How does Edwards prefer to use the term “self-love”?

· **ANSWER.** *Edwards prefers to use the term to signify “man’s regard to his confined private self, or to love to himself with respect to his private interest” (389). Piper understands this usage to be virtually synonymous with selfishness.*

Here is one of the more challenging quotations in this section:

*“If there could be a cause [like self-love] determining a person to benevolence towards the whole world of mankind, or even all created sensible natures throughout the universe, exclusive of union of heart to general existence and of love to God—not derived from that temper of mind which disposes to a supreme regard to him, nor subordinate to such divine love—it cannot be of the nature of true virtue.”<sup>65</sup>*

4. Rewrite this argument in your own words.

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

*Example: What is the nature of true virtue? True virtue cannot be simply equated with anything that might prompt us to act with benevolence toward others. For even if some cause could compel us to act benevolently toward all “sensible” creatures in all the universe, and yet it lacked a love for God, then that cause, whatever it might be, would not be true virtue. By love for God I mean a state of mind that supremely regards God and is subordinate to his love.” To simplify, Edwards is arguing that true virtue must be God-centered.*

5. After carefully reading this section, record one lingering question to ask during the class discussion:

· **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

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## Day 2

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### JONATHAN EDWARDS, THE CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

Our reading of Piper and Edwards continues on this day. Please notice that the fundamental assertions of Christian Hedonism are not something “new” that John Piper “invented.” Many have said these things before, and we believe that the Bible itself teaches Christian Hedonism.

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 391–395

- ▷ start at “Edwards’ Positive Treatment of Self–Love”
- ▷ stop at “But Even Good Self–Love Is Merely Natural”

In the introduction to this course we read a quotation from Blaise Pascal:

*“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.”*<sup>66</sup>

And here is a quotation from Edwards that we read in this section:

*“It is not contrary to Christianity that a man should love himself, or, which is the same thing, should love his own happiness. If Christianity did indeed tend to destroy a man’s love to himself, and to his own happiness, it would therein tend to destroy the very spirit of humanity . . . That a man should love his own happiness, is as necessary to his nature as the faculty of the will is, and it is impossible that such a love should be destroyed in any other way than by destroying his being.”*<sup>67</sup>

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66 Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.19, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

67 Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.391, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Italics removed.

6. Compare these two quotations. Would Pascal and Edwards agree? Are they making identical assertions?

· **ANSWER.** *Pascal and Edwards would certainly agree that every human is motivated by a desire for their own happiness, but they are not making identical assertions. Pascal is simply observing that all men seek happiness. Edwards goes further by asserting that seeking one's own happiness is necessary to human nature—as necessary as the faculty of the will.*

7. Respond to the following statement: “Pascal and Edwards are philosophizing beyond what the Bible actually teaches. You can't show me a verse that supports the idea that all men naturally and inevitably seek their own happiness.”

· **ANSWER.** *Although the Bible may not explicitly state the idea in a single verse, it is everywhere presumed in the Bible. As Edwards says, all the promises and warnings of Scripture work on the “principle of self-love” (391). Furthermore, the idea is clearly implied in verses such as Matthew 19:19 and Ephesians 5:29.*

Here is another challenging quotation:

*“Self-love, taken in the most extensive sense, and love to God are not things properly capable of being compared one with another; for they are not opposites or things entirely distinct, but one enters into the nature of the other ... Self-love is only a capacity of enjoying or taking delight in anything. Now surely 'tis improper to say that our love to God is superior to our general capacity of delighting in anything.”<sup>68</sup>*

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68 Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.392, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Italics removed.

8. Rewrite this argument in your own words.

- **ANSWER.** *“Self-love, defined broadly as a love for one’s own happiness, cannot be played off love for God. These two loves cannot be in conflict, but self-love enters into love to God. Self-love is simply the capacity to delight in something whereas love to God addresses the object of our love and the source of delight. Therefore it is improper to say that we love God more than our capacity to love.”*

Think of self-love as a jar and delight in God as water. To dip your jar into the water doesn’t mean that you value the jar above the water. The two cannot be properly set against one another.

9. What objection is Piper responding to in the section entitled “Does ‘Disinterested’ Really Mean Disinterested?” What is Piper’s basic response to this objection?

- **ANSWER.** *Piper is responding to the objection that Edwards was not a Christian Hedonist because he spoke of “disinterested love.” In this section, Piper labors to demonstrate that Edwards meant “a love grounded in a desire for God and not his gifts” by the term. In so doing, Piper wants to show that his own thought is fully compatible with Edwards’.*

10. How would you answer John Piper’s (and Jonathan Edwards’) question, “Should we be willing to be damned for the glory of God?”

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

## Day 3

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### GOD'S GLORY BEING REJOICED IN

In this day we will finish reading this chapter in *Future Grace*. Remember to move slowly and to strive for a deep understanding of Piper and Edwards.

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 396–398

- ▷ start at “But Even Good Self-Love Is Merely Natural”
- ▷ stop at “How Then Shall We Live?”

11. Piper summarizes Edwards' critique of self-love near the beginning of the chapter by saying that “its branches don't reach high enough and its roots don't go deep enough” (388). In view of this section, what do you think Piper means by this?

- **ANSWER.** *The branches of self-love don't reach high enough because they don't reach up to God to embrace him as love's delight. The roots of self-love don't go deep enough because self-love is not grounded by God's gracious work of regeneration. Self-love does not have God at the top and the bottom, as the goal and the ground (396).*

Now examine a few sentences from Piper and an excerpt from Edwards:

*“Behind the repentance that turns away from sin, and behind the faith that embraces Christ, is the birth of a new taste, a new longing, a new passion for the pleasure of God's presence. This is the root of conversion. This is the creation of a Christian Hedonist.”*<sup>69</sup>

*“When once the soul is brought to relish the excellency of the Divine nature, then it will naturally, and of course, incline to God every way. It will incline to be with Him and to enjoy Him. It will have benevolence to God. It will be glad that He is happy. It will incline that He should be glorified, and that His will should be done in all things. So that the first effect of the power of God in the heart in*

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69 Excerpt(s) from *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* by John Piper, p.74, copyright © 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

*REGENERATION, is to give the heart a Divine taste or sense; to cause it to have a relish of the loveliness and sweetness of the supreme excellency of the Divine nature; and indeed this is all the immediate effect of the Divine power that there is; this is all the Spirit of God needs to do, in order to a production of all good effects in the soul.”<sup>70</sup>*

12. Compare these two quotations. Would Piper and Edwards agree? Are they making identical assertions?

- **ANSWER.** *Piper and Edwards agree that a gracious act of God (regeneration) by which God orients a person to seek happiness in his glory is the essence of conversion. Piper calls this “the creation of a Christian Hedonist.” Edwards goes beyond what Piper says (in this quote) by asserting that this new orientation, or inclination, characterizes the believer’s life of faith and inevitably produces good works. In Piper’s terminology, this thought could be expressed as “the new taste given at the birth of a Christian Hedonist is a delight in God by which the Christian Hedonist lives their entire life of faith in future grace.”*

**Required Reading:** *Future Grace*, pages 398–401

- ▷ start at “How Then Shall We Live?”

*“Because [God] infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself, and complacency and joy in himself; he therefore valued the image, communication or participation of these, in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love and complacency ... [Thus] God’s respect to the creature’s good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at, is happiness in union with himself.”<sup>71</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> Excerpt(s) from *Future Grace, revised edition: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God* by John Piper, p.397, copyright © 1995, 2012 by Desiring God Foundation. Used by permission of WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Italics removed.

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13. Rewrite this argument in your own words.

- **ANSWER.** *God infinitely values his own glory. This valuation (esteem) for his own glory consists of God knowing, loving, and taking delight in himself. Since he relishes these God-centered activities in himself, he takes great delight in creating and contemplating these same God-centered activities in a human person. Being implied that it is the highest good for a creature to delight in God, there is no conflict in God's pursuit of his own glory and his pursuit of our good. When he aims to make us happy, he aims to do so by allowing us to take the same happiness that he takes in himself.*

14. Why might John Piper have written this chapter? Why would he want to demonstrate that his theology of Christian Hedonism is consistent with the thought of Jonathan Edwards?

- **ANSWER.** *John Piper has probably written this chapter because of his high esteem for Jonathan Edwards, whom he calls "one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church" (399). By demonstrating that Christian Hedonism is consistent with Edwards' thought, John Piper is drawing the reader's attention to Edwards, bolstering the credibility of Christian Hedonism, and showing his dependence on Edwards.*

15. Review the five convictions of Christian Hedonism as presented in Lesson 1 of this course. Do you think Edwards would agree with each conviction? Do you agree with each conviction? Explain.

- **ANSWER.** *Answers will vary*

## Day 4

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### JONATHAN EDWARDS ON THE DIVINE DECREES

It has been the contention of this course that the God-centeredness of God informs every aspect of the Christian life: we are to esteem the glory of God above all things because God esteems the glory of God above all things. And since God's most loving act is the act by which he brings us, through Jesus Christ, into his own enjoyment of his own glory, the happiness of God is of fundamental concern. As John Piper says in *Desiring God*, "If God is not a happy God, Christian Hedonism has no foundation" (32–33).

But as Piper declares a few sentences later, "the foundation of the happiness of God is the sovereignty of God" (33). Therefore, it could be said that Christian Hedonism (and our own happiness) has no foundation if God is not sovereign. Since the sovereignty of God is the foundation of the happiness of God, it is also the foundation of everything this course has asserted. Once this is seen, the sovereignty of God becomes no mere theoretical doctrine—all our happiness depends on it!

That is why we will end our required reading with Appendix 5 of *Desiring God* "Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained that Evil Be? Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees." It is no accident that John Piper, Jonathan Edwards, and other vocal Christian Hedonists all ascribe absolute sovereignty to God. We hope you will too.

**Required Reading:** *Desiring God*, pages 352–368  
(pages 355–366 can be read more quickly)

16. This course could be as easily named God-Entranced Living as God-Centered Living. Describe what Piper means by a "God-entranced worldview."
- **ANSWER.** *A God-entranced worldview is one in which a person joyfully embraces the absolute sovereignty of God over all creation. Or, as the mission statement of Bethlehem College & Seminary states, "a passion for the supremacy of God in all things." This worldview provides a "marvelous stability and depth" to one's life.*

17. Why do you think that John Piper wants us to know Jonathan Edwards' thoughts on God's sovereignty and evil?

· **ANSWER.** *Piper realizes that this issue is a difficult one with which many people wrestle. But since the issue is so important, and since Edwards is such an insightful theologian, Piper wants Edwards to help us think about this issue biblically.*

18. When Spurgeon compares the difference between “fate and Providence” to the difference between “a man with good eyes and a blind man” (362), what does he mean?

· **ANSWER.** *Fate is like a blind man in that a blind man cannot see a goal and move toward it. His gropings in the dark are without purpose or direction. Providence, in contrast, is like a man with good eyes who sees where he is going and can move deliberately. God's sovereignty without his wisdom (if such a thing can be conceived) would be no different from fate. But since God has a purpose for everything he does, we cannot equate his providence with fate.*

In section 2.1 Piper addresses the question of whether God is the author of sin. As his argument proceeds, however, Piper also answers another related question which he, nevertheless, never explicitly asks.

19. What implicit question is behind most of the material on pages 364–366?

· **ANSWER.** *Since Piper contends that sin “necessarily comes to pass by God's permission but not by His ‘positive agency” (364), the question naturally arises of how God can ordain sin, though he is opposed to it. This question prompts Piper to clarify the two senses in which God wills.*

20. Summarize the long quotation of Edwards that is offered on page 367.

- **ANSWER.** *The final and good end which God brings out of the existence of evil is the full manifestation of his glory. In some sense, the glory of God (both in his holiness and his mercy) would not be seen in all its fullness if evil did not exist. Therefore, for the display of the glory of God and the corresponding happiness of the creature, God ordained for evil to exist.*



## INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

For the final integrative assignment in this course, we will read excerpts from a sermon Edwards preached on our Christian pilgrimage.

*“In September of 1733, [Edwards] preached a sermon called ‘The Christian Pilgrim, Or, The True Christian’s Life a Journey Toward Heaven.’ It was based on Hebrews 11:13–14:*

*These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.*

*Let his vision shape yours.*

### **Pilgrims are not diverted from their aim.**

*A traveler ... is not enticed by fine appearances to put off the thought of proceeding. No, but his journey’s end is in his mind. If he meets with comfortable accommodations at an inn, he entertains no thoughts of settling there. He considers that these things are not his own, that he is but a stranger, and when he has refreshed himself, or tarried for a night, he is for going forward. (Works, Banner of Truth, p. 243)*

### **Pilgrims are to hold the things of this world loosely.**

*So should we desire heaven more than the comforts and enjoyments of this life. ... Our hearts ought to be loose to these things, as that of a man on a journey, that we may as cheerfully part with them whenever God calls. (243)*

### **Pilgrims become like what they hope to attain.**

*We should be endeavoring to come nearer to heaven, in being more heavenly, becoming more and more like the inhabitants of heaven in respect of holiness and conformity to God, the knowledge of God and Christ, in clear views of the glory of God, the beauty of Christ, and the excellency of divine things, as we come nearer to the beatific vision. - We should labor to be continually growing in divine love - that this may be an increasing flame in our hearts, till they ascend wholly in this flame. (244)*

**Pilgrims will not be satisfied with anything less than God.**

*God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. - To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean. ... Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness? (244)*

**Pilgrims are not grieved by their arrival at the journey's end.**

*To spend our lives so as to be only a journeying towards heaven, is the way to be free from bondage and to have the prospect and forethought of death comfortable. Does the traveler think of his journey's end with fear and terror? Is it terrible to him to think that he has almost got to his journey's end? Were the children of Israel sorry after forty years' travel in the wilderness, when they had almost got to Canaan? (246)*

**Pilgrims ponder what they pursue.**

*Labor to be much acquainted with heaven. - If you are not acquainted with it, you will not be likely to spend your life as a journey thither. You will not be sensible of its worth, nor will you long for it. Unless you are much conversant in your mind with a better good, it will be exceeding difficult to you to have your hearts loose from these things, to use them only in subordination to something else, and be ready to part with them for the sake of that better good. - Labor therefore to obtain a realizing sense of a heavenly world, to get a firm belief of its reality, and to be very much conversant with it in your thoughts. (246)*

**Pilgrims travel together (in small groups).**

*Let Christians help one another in going this journey. ... Company is very desirable in a journey, but in none so much as this. - Let them go united and not fall out by the way, which would be to hinder one another, but use all means they can to help each other up the hill. - This would ensure a more successful traveling and a more joyful meeting at their Father's house in glory. (246)"<sup>72</sup>*

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72 John Piper, "Jonathan Edwards on the Pilgrim Mindset," an online article at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

After reading these various excerpts from Edwards' sermon, underline and label sentences or phrases which correspond to things we have studied in this course. Then reflect on how this article might encourage you to obey 1 Peter 1:13, which reads: "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Record your reflections below.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974).
- ▷ *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004)
- ▷ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998).
- ▷ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004).
- ▷ Sam Storms, *Signs of the Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007).

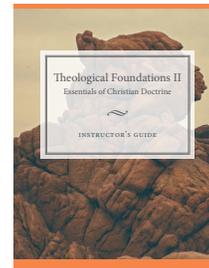
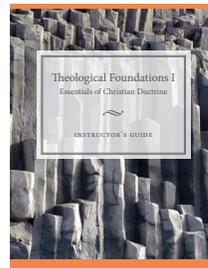
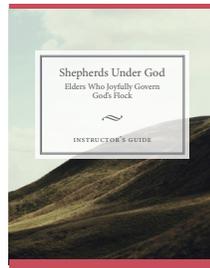
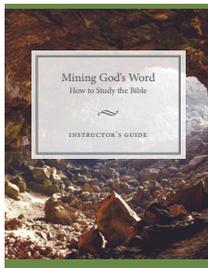


# God-Centered Living

## Christian Hedonism and the Life of Faith

*God-Centered Living: Christian Hedonism and the Life of Faith* is a 12-week course designed to introduce students to the dangerous duty of delighting in God and how that plays out in living the day-to-day Christian life by faith. This course is an introduction to Christian Hedonism, a philosophy of life that is built on the God of the Bible. The course unfolds two key assertions: 1) the God-centeredness of God informs every aspect of the Christian life; and 2) the pursuit of God's glory and the pursuit of our joy is the same pursuit. Therefore, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." In this course, students will examine key biblical passages and then thoughtfully interact with some of the central writings of Dr. John Piper: *Desiring God*, *God Is the Gospel*, and *Future Grace*. Biblical study, critical reflection, group discussion, and application are all important components of this course.

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