

JOHN PIPER

THE  
PLEASURES  
OF GOD

Meditations on God's Delight in Being God



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# THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN HIS SON

*“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”*

M A T T H E W 17:5

## ENTERING THE JOY OF GOD

**T**here is a beautiful phrase in 1 Timothy 1:11 buried beneath the too-familiar surface of Bible buzzwords. Before we dig it up, it sounds like this: “The gospel of the glory of the blessed God.”<sup>1</sup> But after you dig it up, it sounds like this: “The good news of the glory of the happy God.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Most versions (NIV, NASB, RSV, KJV) treat the phrase, “of the glory,” as an adjective and translate like this: “the *glorious* gospel of the blessed God.” But this is not necessary because all these versions translate a similar phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:4 as “the gospel of the *glory of Christ*,” not as “the *glorious gospel* of Christ.” I agree with Henry Alford that the versions should follow the same literal principle in 1 Timothy 1:11 that they follow in 2 Corinthians 4:4. “All propriety and beauty of expression is here [in 1 Timothy 1:11], as always, destroyed by this adjectival rendering. The gospel is ‘the glad tidings of the glory of God,’ as of Christ in 2 Corinthians 4:4, inasmuch as it reveals to us God in all His glory.” Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 307.
  2. The word translated “blessed” in this phrase (*makarios*) is the same one used in the beatitudes. “*Blessed* are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. *Blessed* are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. *Blessed* are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” And so on. It means “happy” or “fortunate.” Paul himself uses it in other places to refer to the happiness of the person whose sins are forgiven (Romans 4:7) or the person whose conscience is clear (Romans 14:22). So 1 Timothy 1:11 is referring to “the gospel of the glory of the *happy* God.”

A great part of God's glory is his happiness. It was inconceivable to the apostle Paul that God could be denied infinite joy and still be all-glorious. To be infinitely glorious was to be infinitely happy. He used the phrase, "the glory of the happy God," because it is a glorious thing for God to be as happy as he is. God's glory consists much in the fact that he is happy beyond our wildest imagination.

As the great eighteenth-century preacher, Jonathan Edwards, said, "Part of God's fullness which he communicates, is his *happiness*. This happiness consists in enjoying and rejoicing in himself; so does also the creature's happiness."<sup>3</sup>

And this is the *gospel*: "The gospel of the glory of the happy God." It is good news that God is gloriously happy. No one would want to spend eternity with an unhappy God. If God is unhappy then the goal of the gospel is not a happy goal, and that means it would be no gospel at all. But, in fact, Jesus invites us to spend eternity with a happy God when he says, "Enter into the *joy* of your master" (Matthew 25:23). Jesus lived and died that *his* joy—God's joy—might be in us and our joy might be full (John 15:11; 17:13). Therefore the gospel is "the gospel of the glory of the happy God."

What I want to try to show in this chapter is that the happiness of God is first and foremost a happiness in his Son. Thus when we share in the happiness of God we share in the very pleasure that the Father has in the Son. This is why Jesus made the Father known to us. At the end of his great prayer in John 17 he said to his Father, "I made known to them your name, and I will make it known, *that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them*" (v. 26). He made God known so that God's pleasure in his Son might be in us and become our pleasure.

Imagine being able to enjoy what is most enjoyable with unbounded energy and passion forever. This is not now our experience. Three things

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3. John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006, 158 ¶72). This book is an extended meditation on Jonathan Edwards's great work, *The End for Which God Created the World*. The truth that God is infinitely happy in the fellowship of the Trinity is shown there to be the ground of our ever-increasing happiness, as God grants us the unspeakable privilege of enjoying God with the very joy of God.

stand in the way of our complete satisfaction in this world. One is that nothing has a personal worth great enough to meet the deepest longings of our hearts. Another is that we lack the strength to savor the best treasures to their maximum worth. And the third obstacle to complete satisfaction is that our joys here come to an end. Nothing lasts.

But if the aim of Jesus in John 17:26 comes true, all this will change. If God's pleasure in the Son becomes our pleasure, then the object of our pleasure, Jesus, will be inexhaustible in personal worth. He will never become boring or disappointing or frustrating. No greater treasure can be conceived than the Son of God. Moreover, our ability to savor this inexhaustible treasure will not be limited by human weaknesses. We will enjoy the Son of God with the very enjoyment of his Father. God's delight in his Son will be in us and it will be ours. And this will never end, because neither the Father nor the Son ever ends. Their love for each other will be our love for them and therefore our loving them will never die.

#### LOVED FOR SHINING LIKE THE SUN

God's pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure in his Son. The Bible reveals this to us while showing us the face of Jesus shining like the sun. In Matthew 17 Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain. When they are all alone something utterly astonishing happens. Suddenly God pulls back the curtain of the incarnation and lets the kingly glory of the Son of God shine through. "His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light" (v. 2). Peter and the others were stunned. Near the end of his life Peter wrote that he had seen the Majestic Glory on the holy mountain, and that he had heard a voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (2 Peter 1:17–18; Matthew 17:5).

When God declares openly that he loves and delights in his Son, he gives a visual demonstration of the Son's unimaginable glory. His face shone like the sun, his garments became translucent with light, and the disciples fell on their faces (Matthew 17:6). The point is not merely that humans should stand in awe of such a glory, but that God himself takes full pleasure in the radiance of his Son. He reveals him in blinding light, and then says, "This is my delight!"

A memory is fresh in my mind that makes the radiance of God's Son very real. Our staff took a two-day retreat for prayer and planning at the beginning of 1991. The retreat center was a former mansion now made into simple accommodations by the Maryhill sisters for people who want to seek God. Our second day there I got up early and took my Bible to the garden porch, a glassed-in nook of the house overlooking a steep drop-off and the Mississippi River to the east. The sun was not yet up, but there was light.

My appointed reading for that morning was Psalm 3. I read, "You, O Lord, are my glory, and the lifter of my head." And as I pondered this, the red pinpoint of the sun pierced the horizon straight in front of me. It startled me because I hadn't realized I was facing east. I watched for a moment as the pinpoint became a fingernail of fire. Then I read on. "Arise, O Lord!" And I looked up to see the whole red-gold ball blazing just over the river. Within moments there was no more looking at it without going blind. The higher it rose the brighter it got.

I thought of John's vision of Christ in Revelation 1: "His face was like the sun shining in full strength" (v. 16). My glimpse that morning lasted maybe five minutes before the strength of the rising sun turned my face away. Who can look upon the sun shining in *full* strength? The answer is that God can. The radiance of the Son's face shines first and foremost for the enjoyment of his Father. "This is the Son whom I love; he is my pleasure. You must fall on your face and turn away, but I behold my Son in his radiance every day with love and never-fading joy."

I thought to myself, surely this is one thing implied in John 17:26—that the day is coming when I will have the capacity to delight in the Son the way the Father does. My fragile eyes will get the power to take in the glory of the Son shining in his full strength just the way the Father does. The pleasure God has in his Son will become my pleasure, and I will not be consumed, but enthralled forever.

#### LOVED FOR SERVING LIKE A DOVE

Again, the Father speaks words of endearment and delight about his Son on another occasion. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit of God descends like a dove while the Father says from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in

whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16–17). The image is very different. Not a flaming sun of intolerable brightness, but a soft, quiet, vulnerable dove—the kind of animal poor people offered for sacrifices in the temple. God’s pleasure in his Son comes not only from the brightness of his majesty but from the beauty of his meekness.

The Father delights in his Son’s *supremacy* and in his *servanthood*. “The Father loves the Son and has given *all things* into his hand” (John 3:35). “Behold *my servant*, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (Isaiah 42:1). Matthew quotes this Old Testament testimony of the Father’s joy and connects it with the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the meekness of Jesus’ ministry.

“Behold, my Servant whom I have chosen,  
my beloved in whom my soul delights.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;  
he will not break a bruised reed  
or quench a smoldering flax.”  
(Matthew 12:18–20)

The Father’s very soul exults with joy over the servantlike meekness and compassion of his Son. When a reed is bent and about to break, the Servant will tenderly hold it upright until it heals. When a wick is smoldering and has scarcely any heat left, the Servant will not pinch it off, but cup his hand and blow gently until it burns again. Thus the Father cries, “Behold, my Servant in whom my soul delights!”

The worth and beauty of the Son come not just from his majesty, nor just from his meekness, but from the way these mingle in perfect proportion. When the angel cried out in Revelation 5:2, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” the answer came back, “Weep not; look, *the Lion of the tribe of Judah*, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). God loves the strength of the Lion of Judah. This is why he is worthy in God’s eyes to

open the scrolls of history and unfold the last days. But the picture is not complete. How did the Lion conquer? The next verse describes his appearance: “And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a *Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*.” Jesus is worthy of the Father’s delight not only as the Lion of Judah, but also as the slain Lamb.

One of the sermons of Jonathan Edwards that God used to kindle the Great Awakening in New England in 1734–1735 was titled “The Excellency of Christ.” In it Edwards unfolds the glory of God’s Son by describing the “admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Christ.” His text is Revelation 5:5–6, and he unfolds the union of “diverse excellencies” in the Lion-Lamb. He shows how the glory of Christ is his combining of attributes that would seem to be utterly incompatible in one Person.

In Jesus Christ, he says, meet infinite highness and infinite condescension; infinite justice and infinite grace; infinite glory and lowest humility; infinite majesty and transcendent meekness; deepest reverence toward God and equality with God; worthiness of good and the greatest patience under the suffering of evil; a great spirit of obedience and supreme dominion over heaven and earth; absolute sovereignty and perfect resignation; self-sufficiency and an entire trust and reliance on God.<sup>4</sup>

#### LOVED AS HAPPY CO-CREATOR

Although the qualities of lowliness and meekness were not manifest until the incarnation, they were nevertheless part of the Son’s character from all eternity. He did not undergo a conversion before he submitted to the Father’s will that he die for sinners. This is why the love that the Father has for the Son goes back before creation. “Father...*you loved me before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:24). There never was a time when the Father was denied the pleasure of delighting in the glory of his Son.

God also loved his Son *in* the very act of creating the universe. He enjoyed his Son as his own Word of Wisdom and creative Power in the act of creation. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

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4. Jonathan Edwards, “The Excellency of Christ,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1, ed. Sereno Dwight (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 680–683.



God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:1–3). The Son was the Wisdom of God creating, with God, all that is not God. And, as the Proverbs say, “A wise son makes a glad father” (Proverbs 10:1; 15:20). God was glad in the wisdom of his creative Son.

In fact, the Proverbs are even more specific concerning God’s Wisdom. Proverbs 8 personifies Wisdom at the beginning of creation as a Master Workman delighting the heart of God. “When he [God] established the heavens, I [Wisdom] was there...beside him, like a Master Workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always” (Proverbs 8:27, 30).<sup>5</sup> The Son of God was the Father’s delight as he rejoiced with the Father in the awesome work of making a million worlds.

I wonder if there was a faint resemblance of this creative camaraderie between Father and Son when Joseph and Jesus worked together in the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. I picture Jesus about fifteen years old, humming as he worked. The plank is cut with masterful strokes, carved with three small posts protruding in their appointed places, and then fitted perfectly into the joining board to make a solid bench. Jesus smiles as he smacks the wood with pleasure. All the while Joseph has been standing at the door watching the hands of his son. He sees the image of his own workmanship and his own life. The skill of his son is the evidence of the father’s skill. The humming of his son is the endorsement of the father’s joy. And when they put their energy together to lift a finished table for the synagogue, their eyes meet with a flash of delight that says, “You are a treasure to me, and I love you with all my heart.”

I have four sons. Though I have not heard any of them preach, I have seen them make A’s in school, and letter in varsity sports, and memorize long portions of Scripture, and slay dragons with plastic

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5. The Hebrew does not have the word “his” in the phrase “his delight” and so some versions and commentators interpret the delight to be Wisdom’s and not God’s (for example, NIV, Keil and Delitzsch). But “I was delights” (literal rendering) is a very unusual way to say, “I was filled with delight” (NIV). Moreover in verse 31 the same word is used with the personal pronoun “my” attached to it to make clear when the delight of Wisdom is in view. I follow the RSV and NASB. But in any case, the principle of a father being made glad by a wise son holds even if it is not made explicit about God’s gladness over his Son in creation.

swords. When I see their skill, I think of all the hours we have played and prayed and thought and fought (the dragons!) together over the years. And my heart fills with a sense of wonder that I am creating things through my sons. When they rejoice in this, and when they smile at me on the sidelines or in the audience, they are a pleasure to me almost as great as anything in the world.

Perhaps we may be allowed to see in this a faint echo of the shout of joy the Father had in the Son when together they created the universe out of nothing. Imagine the look they gave each other when a million galaxies stood forth at their command.

#### INFINITE INTIMACY

No other relationship comes close to this one. It is utterly unique. The Son is absolutely unique in the affections of the Father. He is the “only begotten” (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). There is *the* Son, by eternal generation, and there are other “sons” by adoption. “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his *Son*...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption as sons*” (Galatians 4:4–5). Only in “receiving” Jesus as *the* Son are others empowered to become “children of God” (John 1:12). Jesus often referred to God as “my Father” and “the Father,” but he never referred to God as “our Father” except once, when teaching the disciples how *they* should pray (Matthew 6:9). Once he used the remarkable expression, “my Father and your Father...my God and your God” (John 20:17). The relationship between God the Father and his eternal Son is utterly unique.

Their intimacy and communion are incomparable. “No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son” (Matthew 11:27). “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is *in the bosom of the Father*, he has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus spoke with such unprecedented endearment and intimacy concerning the Father that his enemies sought to kill him “because...he called God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). The Father’s intimacy with the Son was such that he opened all his heart to him. “The Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he

himself is doing” (John 5:20). He withholds no blessing from the Son but pours out his Spirit on him without measure. “He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is *not by measure* that he gives the Spirit; the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:34–35). And as the Son carries out the redeeming plan of the Father, the Father’s heart abounds with increasingly intense expressions of love for the Son. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life” (John 10:17). This overflowing esteem that the Father has for his only Son spills over onto all who serve the Son: “If anyone serves me,” Jesus says, “the Father will honor him” (John 12:26). Thus the Father seeks every means possible to manifest his infinite delight in the Son of his love—including the converse: “How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God!” (Hebrews 10:29).

No angel in heaven ever received such honor and affection as the Son has received from all eternity from his Father. As great and wonderful as angels are, they do not rival the Son. “For to what angel did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son’?” (Hebrews 1:5). “To what angel has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies a stool for your feet’?” (Hebrews 1:13). The point is clear. The Son of God is not an angel—not even the highest archangel. Rather God says, “Let God’s angels worship him!” (Hebrews 1:6). The Son of God is worthy of all the worship that the hosts of heaven can give—not to mention ours. Nor will God himself be excluded from the celebration of the Son. He is thrilled over the greatness and the goodness and the triumph of the Son. He gives him a name which is above every name (Philippians 2:9); he crowns him with honor (Hebrews 2:9); and he glorifies him in his own presence with the glory that he had before the world was made (John 17:5).

#### UNIMAGINABLE FERVENCY

It is impossible to overstate the greatness of the fatherly affection God has for his one and only Son. We see this unbounded affection behind the logic of Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare *his own Son*, but gave

him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?" The point of this unspeakably precious verse is that if God was willing to do the hardest thing for us (give up his cherished Son to misery and death), then surely that which looks hard (giving Christians all the blessings that heaven can hold) will not be too hard for God. What makes this verse work is the immensity of the Father's affection for the Son. Paul's assumption is that "not sparing his own Son" was the hardest thing imaginable for God to do.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is, as Paul put it simply in Colossians 1:13, "the Son of his love."

If there ever was a passion of love in the heart of God it is a passion for his Son. A. W. Tozer once said, "God never changes moods or cools off in his affections or loses enthusiasm."<sup>7</sup> If there is any enthusiasm in God of which this is true, it is his enthusiasm for the Son. It will never change; it will never cool off. It burns with unimaginable fervency and zeal. Therefore, I affirm with Jonathan Edwards, "The infinite happiness of the Father consists in the enjoyment of His Son."<sup>8</sup>

So when we say that God loves his Son, we are not talking about a love that is self-denying, sacrificial, or merciful. We are talking about a love of delight and pleasure. God is not stooping to pity the undeserving when he loves his Son. That is how God loves *us*. It is not how he loves his Son. He is well-pleased with his Son. His soul delights in the Son! When he looks at his Son he enjoys and admires and cherishes and prizes and relishes what he sees. The first great pleasure of God is his pleasure in the Son.

#### THE FULLNESS OF DEITY DWELLS IN A BODY

To avoid a harmful mistake about God's love for his Son, we need to go further now and show that the Son of God has the fullness of deity. A person might agree with the affirmation that God has pleasure in the Son, but then make the mistake of thinking that the Son is merely an extraordinarily holy man that the Father somehow adopted to be his Son because he delighted in him so much. From as early as the second

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6. See chapter 6, "The Pleasure of God in Bruising the Son," for a discussion of how God can take pleasure in something that is so hard for him to do.

7. A. W. Tozer, *A. W. Tozer: An Anthology* (Camp Hill, Pa: Christian Publications, 1984), 89.

8. Jonathan Edwards, "An Essay on the Trinity," *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co. Ltd., 1971), 105.

century the Christian church has distinguished true biblical faith from different forms of this kind of teaching called adoptionism.<sup>9</sup>

Colossians 2:9 gives us a very different angle on things. “In [Christ] the whole *fullness of deity* dwells bodily.” The Son of God is not merely a holy and faithful man. He has the fullness of deity. God did not look for a holy man whom he could somehow take up into the Godhead by putting deity in him. Rather “the Word became flesh” in an act of incarnation (John 1:14). God sought a humble, faithful woman, and, through the virgin birth, united the fullness of his deity with a child of his own conceiving. “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have no husband?’ And the angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’” (Luke 1:34–35). God did not take a holy man up into deity. He clothed the fullness of deity with a virgin-born human nature, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the God-Man, in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

This is why Jesus’ friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Or, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” To the dead he might simply say, “Come forth,” or, “Rise up.” And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, “Be still.” And to a loaf of bread he would say, “Become a thousand meals.” And it was done immediately. And in response to the high priest’s question, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” he said, “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” No man ever spoke like this man. No man ever lived and loved like this man. For in this man God himself had made all the fullness of deity dwell bodily.

And God did this with all his heart. It was his *pleasure* to make the Word flesh. Colossians 1:19 puts it like this: “In him all the fullness [of

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9. See William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 275. On Theodotus, the first to teach this heresy in the second century, see J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1968), 157–159, 165.

deity] *was pleased* to dwell.” This translation seems to say that “fullness” was pleased, or had pleasure. That’s an unlikely statement, because *persons* are usually pleased, not abstract things like “fullness.” The NIV seems closer to the meaning when it paraphrases like this: “*God was pleased* to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ].”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it was God’s *pleasure* to do this.<sup>11</sup> We have seen that God loved his Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24), and that he loved him in his incarnate state (John 10:17). Now we see that, when God the Father and God the Son engaged to unite deity and humanity in Jesus, the Father rejoiced over this act. He delighted in his Son’s readiness to redeem the world. Therefore it says, “It pleased [God] for the fullness of deity to dwell in [Christ].”

#### BEGOTTEN NOT MADE

Now again we should press on a step farther to guard against misunderstanding and to enlarge the vista of the glory of God’s gladness in the Son. The fullness of deity, which now dwells bodily in Jesus (Colossians 2:9), already existed in personal form before the God-Man, Jesus Christ, existed as a Jewish teacher on the earth. This pushes us back further into the happiness of the triune God. *The Son, in whom God delights, is the eternal image and radiance of God and is thus himself God.*

In Colossians 1:15–16 Paul says, “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth.”

10. Alford agrees with this on the analogy of Paul’s use of *eudokeō* (be pleased with) elsewhere. “The subject here is naturally understood to be God, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 1:21 and Galatians 1:15.” *The Greek Testament*, 3, 205.

11. The word *eudokeō* can carry more or less connotation of strong delight. The lexicon of Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich gives two clusters of usage for the word. One is “consider good, consent, determine, resolve.” The other is “be well pleased, take delight.” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 319. Only the context can determine whether the connotation of delight is more or less present. The reason I think it carries the connotation of delight here in Colossians 1:19 is, first, because at least six of Paul’s other ten uses of the word almost certainly carry this connotation (1 Corinthians 10:5; Romans 15:26–27 [compare 2 Corinthians 8:2]; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 12:10 [compare Romans 5:3]; 2 Thessalonians 2:12); second, the other uses in the New Testament outside Paul seem to have this connotation (Matthew 3:17 = Mark 1:11 = Luke 3:22; Matthew 17:5 = 2 Peter 1:17; Matthew 12:28; Luke 12:32; Hebrews 10:6, 8, 38); third, the four other uses in Paul (not yet mentioned) can carry this connotation (1 Corinthians 1:21; Galatians 1:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:8; 3:1); and fourth, it is inconceivable to me, in view of all we have seen of the Father’s delight in the Son and his profound joy over the incarnate obedience of the Son, that he could act in the incarnation with less than immense enthusiasm and joy. (See note 6.)

Historically this has been a very controversial text. And still today there are sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses that give it a meaning contrary to the meaning understood by historic Christian orthodoxy. About A.D. 256 a man named Arius was born in Libya who became one of the most famous heretics of the Christian church. He put this text to use for his doctrine. He was educated by a teacher named Lucian in Antioch and became a prominent elder in the church of Alexandria in Egypt. He was described as "a tall, lean man, with a downcast brow, very austere habits, considerable learning, and a smooth, winning address, but quarrelsome disposition."<sup>12</sup>

The so-called Arian controversy began about A.D. 318 in Alexandria when Arius disputed with Bishop Alexander concerning the eternal deity of Christ. Arius began to teach that the Son of God was different in essence from the Father and that he was created by the Father rather than coeternal with the Father. Socrates, a church historian who lived in Constantinople between A.D. 380 and 439, tells the story of how this controversy began:

Alexander [Bishop of Alexandria] attempted one day, in the presence of the presbyters and the rest of his clergy, too ambitious a discourse about the Holy Trinity, the subject being "Unity in Trinity."

Arius, one of the presbyters under his jurisdiction, a man possessed of no inconsiderable logical acumen, thinking that the bishop was introducing the doctrine of Sabellius the Libyan [who stressed Jewish monotheism to the extent of denying a true Trinity], from love of controversy, advanced another view diametrically opposed to the opinion of the Libyan, and, as it seemed, vehemently controverted the statements of the bishop. "If," said he, "the Father begat the Son, He that was begotten has a beginning of existence; and from this it is evident, that there was when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows that He had His essence from the non-existent."<sup>13</sup>

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12. Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopedia: Or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1888), 139.

13. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 340.

It is easy to see how Colossians 1:15 could be made to support Arius's position. Paul said that Christ is "the firstborn of all creation." One could easily take this to mean that Christ was himself part of creation and was the first and highest creature. Thus he would have a beginning; there would be a time when he had no existence at all. And thus his essence would not be the essence of God but would be created out of nothing like the rest of creation. This is in fact what Arius taught.<sup>14</sup>

The next seven years after this first dispute in A.D. 318 saw the controversy spread across the entire empire. Constantine, the emperor, was forced to become involved for the sake of the unity of the church. He called a great Council in A.D. 325 to deal with these weighty matters, and designated the city to be Nicea "because of the excellent temperature of the air, and in order that I may be present as a spectator and participator in those things which will be done."<sup>15</sup> The Council produced a creed that left no doubt that it considered Arius's ideas heretical.

The Nicene Creed that we know and recite today is based on the one I will quote which is technically called "The Creed of Nicea." It will be plain to every reader which parts of the creed are intended to distinguish orthodoxy from Arianism.

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on the earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge living and dead; And in the Holy Spirit.

And those that say "There was when he was not," and, "Before he was begotten he was not," and that, "He came into being from what-is-not," or those that allege, that the Son of

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14. There are two letters from Arius that state these views in *Ibid.*, 344–347.

15. *Ibid.*, 358.



God is “Of another substance or essence” or “created,” or “changeable,” or “alterable,” these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.<sup>16</sup>

This has remained the orthodox understanding of Scripture throughout all church history to our own day. I feel compelled to defend this understanding here because if Arianism (or the Jehovah’s Witnesses) proved right, then the pleasure of God in his Son would be a radically different thing than I take it to be. And the foundation of everything else in this book would be shaken. Everything hangs on the unbounded joy in the triune God from all eternity. This is the source of God’s absolute self-sufficiency as a happy Sovereign. And every true act of free grace in redemptive history depends on it.

How then are we to understand Paul when he says in Colossians 1:15, “He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of all creation*”? What does *firstborn* mean? And does not “of all creation” mean that he is part of creation?

First, we should realize that “of all creation” does not have to mean that Christ was part of creation. If I said, “God is ruler *of all creation*,” no one would think I meant God is part of creation. I mean that he is ruler “*over all creation*.” There is a good clue in the next verse (Colossians 1:16) which helps us understand whether Paul means something like this. He says, “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; *because in him all things were created*.” In other words, the reason Paul calls Christ the firstborn “of all creation” is “because in him *all things were created*.” The reason is *not* that he was the first and greatest created thing. The reason is that *every* created thing was created by him. This does not incline us to think then that “firstborn of all creation” means “firstborn *among* all created things,” but rather “firstborn *over* all created things.”

The second thing to realize is that the term “firstborn” (*prōtotokos*) can have a strictly biological meaning: “And she gave birth to her *firstborn* son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths” (Luke 2:7). But it can

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16. The creed is taken from Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 25.

also have a nonbiological meaning of dignity and precedence.<sup>17</sup> For example, in Psalm 89:27 God says of the one who will sit on David's throne, "I will make him *the firstborn*, the highest of the kings of the earth." The meaning here is that this king will have preeminence and honor and dignity over all the kings of the earth. Other nonbiological uses are found in Exodus 4:22 where Israel is called God's "firstborn son"; and Hebrews 12:23 where all believers are called the "firstborn who are written in heaven."

So there are four reasons we can give now why Arius and the Jehovah's Witnesses are wrong to say that Colossians 1:15 means that Christ was part of God's creation. First, the word *firstborn* can very naturally mean "preeminent one" or "one with superior dignity" or "one who is first in time and rank." It does not have to imply that Christ was brought forth as part of the creation.<sup>18</sup> Second, verse 16 (as we have seen) implies clearly that Christ was the Creator of all things and not part of the creation ("because in him *all things* were created"). Third, Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407) pointed out that Paul avoided the word that would have clearly implied that Christ was the first creation (*prōtoktistos*)<sup>19</sup> and chose to use instead a word with connotations of parent-child, not Creator-creation (firstborn, *prōtotokos*).

This leads to the fourth reason for rejecting the Arian interpretation of Colossians 1:15. In using the term "firstborn," Paul speaks in remarkable harmony with the apostle John who calls Christ God's "only begotten Son" (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) and teaches clearly that this does not make him a creature but rather makes him God: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and *the Word was God*" (John 1:1).<sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis shows why the use of the term "begotten" (and we could add Paul's term, "firstborn") implies the deity of Christ and not his being a creature.

17. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 146–150.

18. The use of *prototokos* in Colossians 1:18 (firstborn from the dead) does not contradict this. His being part of the dead is determined by the preposition "from" (*ek*), not merely by the word *prototokos*. This preposition is not used in verse 15.

19. Cited in Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3, 203.

20. The attempt by the Jehovah's Witnesses to make this verse mean, "And the Word was a god," is shown to be grammatically and contextually erroneous by Bruce Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* (April 1953): 65–85.

When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, and man makes a wireless set—or he may make something more like himself than a wireless set, say, a statue. If he's clever enough a carver he makes a statue which is very much like a man indeed. But, of course, it's not a real man; it only looks like one. It can't breathe or think. It's not alive.<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons, then, I take my stand gladly with the great tradition of Christian orthodoxy and not with ancient or modern Arianism. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn *over* all creation. "He is *the radiance of the glory of God and the very stamp of his nature*" (Hebrews 1:3). "Though *he was in the form of God*, [he] did not count *equality with God* a thing to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God*" (John 1:1).

So the Son in whom the Father delights is the image of God and the radiance of the glory of God. He bears the very stamp of God's nature and is the very form of God. He is equal with God and, as John says, is God.

From all eternity, before creation, the one reality that has always existed is God. This is a great mystery, because it is so hard for us to think of God having absolutely no beginning, and just being there forever and ever and ever, without anything or anyone making him be there—just absolute reality that everyone of us has to reckon with whether we like it or not. But this ever-living God has not been "alone." He has not been a solitary center of consciousness. There has always been another, who has been one with God in essence and glory, and yet distinct in personhood so that they have had a personal relationship for all eternity.

The Bible teaches that this eternal God has always had a perfect *image* of himself (Colossians 1:15), a perfect *radiance* of his essence

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21. C. S. Lewis, *Beyond Personality* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 5.

(Hebrews 1:3), a perfect *stamp* or *imprint* of his nature (Hebrews 1:3), a perfect *form* or expression of his glory (Philippians 2:6).

We are on the brink of the ineffable here, but perhaps we may dare to say this much: as long as God has been God (eternally) he has been conscious of himself; and the image that he has of himself is so perfect and so complete and so full as to *be* the living, personal reproduction (or begetting) of himself. And this living, personal image or radiance or form of God is *God*, namely God the Son. And therefore God the Son is coeternal with God the Father and equal in essence and glory.<sup>22</sup>

#### GOD'S DELIGHT IN BEING GOD

We may conclude that the pleasure of God in his Son is pleasure in himself. Since the Son is the image of God and the radiance of God and the form of God, equal with God, and indeed *is* God, therefore God's delight in the Son is delight in himself. The original, the primal, the deepest, the foundational joy of God is the joy he has in his own perfections as he sees them reflected in the glory of his Son. Paul speaks of "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). From all eternity God had

22. For how the personal, divine Holy Spirit fits in to this conception of the Trinity see note 24. Jonathan Edwards develops this view of the Son's deity in an essay titled "An Essay on the Trinity" (note 8). He first considers a human analogy:

If a man could have an absolutely perfect idea of all that pass'd in his mind, all the series of ideas and exercises in every respect perfect as to order, degree, circumstance etc. for any particular space of time past, suppose the last hour, he would really, to all intents and purpose, be over again what he was that last hour. And if it were possible for a man by reflection perfectly to contemplate all that is in his own mind in a hour, as it is and at the same time that it is there, in its first and direct existence; if a man, that is, had a perfect reflex or contemplative idea of every thought at the same moment or moments that that thought was, and of every exercise at and during the same time that that exercise was, and so through a whole hour, a man would really be two during that time, he would be indeed double, he would be twice at once. The idea he has of himself would be himself again. (102)

Edwards then carries the analogy over to God and says,

Therefore as God with perfect clearness, fullness and strength, understands Himself, views His own essence (in which there is no distinction of substance and act but which is wholly substance and wholly act), that idea which God hath of Himself is absolutely Himself. This representation of the Divine nature and essence is the Divine nature and essence again: so that by God's thinking of the deity, [deity] must certainly be generated. Hereby there is another person begotten, there is another infinite eternal almighty and most holy and the same God, the very same divine nature.

And this person is the second person of the Trinity, the only begotten and dearly beloved Son of God; He is the eternal, necessary, perfect, substantial and personal idea which God hath of Himself; and that it is so seems to me to be abundantly confirmed by the word of God. (103)

Here Edwards begins a lengthy meditation on Scripture to demonstrate that this view is not merely the result of rational speculation but also the fruit of biblical meditation.

beheld the panorama of his own perfections in the face of his Son. All that he is he sees reflected fully and perfectly in the countenance of his Son. And in this he rejoices with infinite joy.

At first this sounds like vanity. It *would* be vanity if we humans found *our* deepest joy by looking in the mirror. We *would* be vain and conceited and smug and selfish if we were like God in this regard. But why? Aren't we supposed to imitate God (Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 5:1)? Yes, in some ways. But not in every way. This was the first deceit of Satan in the Garden of Eden: He tempted Adam and Eve to try to be like God in a way that God never intended them to be like him—namely, in self-reliance. *Only* God should be self-reliant. All the rest of us should be God-reliant. In the same way, we were created for something infinitely better and nobler and greater and deeper than *self*-contemplation. We were created for the contemplation and enjoyment of *God!* Anything less than this would be idolatry toward him and disappointment for us. God is the most glorious of all beings. Not to love him and delight in him is a great loss to us and insults him.

But the same is true for God. How shall God not insult what is infinitely beautiful and glorious? How shall God not commit idolatry? There is only one possible answer: God must love and delight in his own beauty and perfection above all things.<sup>23</sup> For *us* to do this in front of the mirror is the essence of vanity; for *God* to do it in front of his Son is the essence of righteousness.

Is not the essence of righteousness to place supreme value on what is supremely valuable, with all the just actions that follow? And isn't the opposite of righteousness to set our highest affections on things of little or no worth, with all the unjust actions that follow? Thus the righteousness of God is the infinite zeal and joy and pleasure that he has in what is supremely valuable, namely, his own perfection and worth. And if he were ever to act contrary to this eternal passion for his own perfections he would be unrighteous, he would be an idolater.

This is not irrelevant speculation. It is the foundation of all Christian

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23. I have tried elsewhere to show that this is not merely, or even mainly, a logical deduction but a clearly revealed truth of Scripture. See *Desiring God*, appendix 1, hardcover ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010), 308–312.

hope. This will become increasingly obvious especially in chapter 6, but let me point the way here. In this God-centered, divine righteousness lies the greatest obstacle to our salvation. For how shall such a righteous God ever set his affection on sinners like us who have scorned his perfections? But the wonder of the gospel is that in this divine righteousness lies also the very foundation of our salvation. The infinite regard that the Father has for the Son makes it possible for me, a wicked sinner, to be loved and accepted in the Son, because in his death he vindicated the worth and glory of his Father. Now I may pray with new understanding the prayer of the psalmist, “*For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great*” (Psalm 25:11). The new understanding is that Jesus has now atoned for sin and vindicated the Father’s honor so that our sins are forgiven “on account of *his name*” (1 John 2:12). We will see this again and again in the chapters to come—how the Father’s infinite pleasure in his own perfections is the fountain of our everlasting joy. The fact that the pleasure of God in his Son is pleasure in himself is not vanity. It is the gospel.

#### BOUNDLESS JOY VS. BROKEN CISTERNS

If Henry Scougal is right—that the worth and excellency of a soul is measured by the object and intensity of its love—then God is the most excellent and worthy of all beings. For he has loved his Son, the image of his own glory, with infinite and perfect energy from all eternity. How glorious and happy have been the Father and the Son and the Spirit of love flowing between them from all eternity!<sup>24</sup>

24. Here it will be appropriate to mention how the Holy Spirit is conceived of in the view of the Trinity that I have developed, depending largely on Jonathan Edwards. In note 22 I quoted his view of how the Father begets the Son. Here I will quote the key passage on the “procession” of the Holy Spirit.

The Godhead being thus begotten by God’s loving an idea of himself and shewing forth in a distinct subsistence or person in that idea, there proceeds a most pure act, and an infinitely holy and sacred energy arises between the Father and Son in mutually loving and delighting in each other, for their love and joy is mutual, Proverbs 8:30—“I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him”—This is the eternal and most perfect and essential act of the divine nature, wherein the Godhead acts to an infinite degree and in the most perfect manner possible. The Deity becomes all act, the Divine essence itself flows out and is, as it were, breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there proceeds the third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, viz. the deity in act, for there is no other act but the act of the will. (Edwards, *An Essay on the Trinity*, 108)

Edwards proceeds to develop an extended biblical defense of this view of the Holy Spirit (Edwards, *An Essay on the Trinity*, 108–118). He sums up his view like this:

Let us then stand in awe of this great God! And let us turn from all the trivial resentments and fleeting pleasures and petty pursuits of materialism and merely human “spirituality.” And let us be caught up into the gladness that God has in the glory of his Son, who is the radiance and image of his Father. There is coming a day when the very pleasure that the Father has in the Son will be in us and will be our own pleasure. May God’s enjoyment of God—unbounded and everlasting—flow into us even now by the Holy Spirit! This is our glory and our joy.

That millions “exchange their glory for that which does not profit” is an appalling thing.

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this  
be shocked, be utterly desolate,”  
says the LORD,  
“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.”  
(Jeremiah 2:12–13)

There is only one fountain of lasting joy—the overflowing gladness of God in God. Without beginning and without ending, without source and without cause, without help or assistance, the spring is eternally self-replenishing. From this unceasing fountain of joy flow all grace and all joy in the universe—and all the rest of this book. Let everyone who is thirsty come.

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And this I suppose to be the blessed Trinity that we read of in the Holy Scriptures. The Father is the deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner, or the deity in its direct existence. The Son is the deity generated by God’s understanding, or having an idea of Himself and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Ghost is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in God’s infinite love to and delight in Himself. And I believe the whole Divine essence does truly and distinctly subsist both in the Divine idea and Divine love, and that each of them are [sic] properly distinct persons. (Edwards, *An Essay on the Trinity*, 118)