



JOHN PIPER

DESIRING  
GOD

MEDITATIONS *of* A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

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Meditations *of a* Christian Hedonist



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*Twenty-five years ago  
I dedicated this book  
to my father,*

WILLIAM SOLOMON HOTTLE PIPER.

*The sweet indebtedness I still feel to him  
is now only intensified  
by the joy of knowing that today  
his happiness is sinless  
in the presence of Christ.*

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# PREFACE

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

C. S. LEWIS

*The Last Battle*

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

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

Twenty-five years have passed since *Desiring God* first appeared in 1986. The significance of a truth is judged in part by whether over time it has transforming power in very different circumstances. What about the message of this book? Its context today is dramatically different from when it was first published.

Things have changed personally and culturally. Since its first edition, my body and mind have passed from being forty years old to being sixty-five years old. My marriage advanced from a seventeen-year-old marriage to a forty-two-year-old

marriage. My pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church has extended from six years to thirty-one years. My sons have grown through their single teen years into married adulthood, and they have made me a grandfather twelve times over. In 1986 there were no daughters. Now there is Talitha Ruth, whose motto at fifteen is “a girl should get so lost in God, that a guy has to seek *Him* to find *her*.”

Culturally the world is a different place. Consider some of the events: Tiananmen Square, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Rwandan genocide, Columbine High School, the global AIDS pandemic, Y2K, 9/11, the rise of jihadist terrorism, the ceaseless Middle East wars, tsunamis, the historic Obama presidency. Or consider the transformation of popular culture by developments that were not prominent before 1986: laptops, smart phones, debit cards, DVDs, iPods, pay-at-the-pump gasoline, digital cameras, PowerPoint, Purell, Viagra, flat-screen TVs, public use of the Internet, blogging, Web commerce, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and a ceaseless rush of computer-related innovations.

In other words, things have changed. This is the world I live in with profound appreciation and serious concern. But, as personally astute and as culturally awake as I try to be, what seems plain to me is that the really important, deep, and lasting things in life have not changed. And therefore my commitment to the message of this book has not changed. The truth that I unfold here is my life. That *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him* continues to be a spectacular and precious truth in my mind and heart. It has sustained me into my seventh decade of life, and I do not doubt that, because of Jesus, it will carry me Home.

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

Globally, it is increasingly plain that a bold stand for the uniqueness of Christ crucified, not to mention the finishing of the Great Commission among

hostile peoples, will cost the church suffering and martyrs. The post-9/11 world has been troubled with terrorism and war. If the message of this book is to have any credibility, it must give an account of itself in this world of fear and suffering. Increasingly I am drawn to the apostle's experience described in the words "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10).

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

The body ages and things go wrong. Marriage, we found, passes through deep water as husband and wife pass through midlife and beyond. We made it. But we will not diminish the disquietude of those years. We were not ashamed to seek help. God has been good to us—much more kind than we deserve. As we ended our fourth decade of marriage, I thought I might be far enough along to write a seasoned book on marriage. It is called *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*.<sup>1</sup> The paradox of that title is at the root of what we have learned. Now, moving through our seventh decade of life and our fifth decade of marriage, the roots are deep, the covenant is solid, the love is sweet. Life is hard, and God is good.

The other "marriage" in my life (with Bethlehem Baptist Church) has been a mingling of sweetness and sorrow. As I sit here pondering the years, the sweetness so outweighs the sorrow that I have no desire to dwell on the pain. It was all in God's good plan—for us and for the people. The apostle Paul spoke a deep pastoral reality when he said, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Corinthians 1:6). But there is a joy without which pastors cannot profit their people (Hebrews 13:17). Mercifully, God has preserved it for thirty-one years. And the truth of this book has been His means.

During these twenty-five years since *Desiring God* first appeared, I have been testing it and applying its vision in connection with more of life and ministry and

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1. John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2009).



God. The more I do so, the more persuaded I become that it will bear all the weight I can put on it.<sup>2</sup> The more I reflect and the more I minister and the more I live, the more all-encompassing the vision of God and life in this book becomes.

The older I get, the more I am persuaded that Nehemiah 8:10 is crucial for living and dying well: “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” As we grow older and our bodies weaken, we must learn from the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter (who died in 1691) to redouble our efforts to find strength from spiritual joy, not natural supplies. He prayed, “May the Living God, who is the portion and rest of the saints, make these our carnal minds so spiritual, and our earthly hearts so heavenly, that loving Him, and *delighting in Him, may be the work of our lives.*”<sup>3</sup> When delighting in God is the work of our lives (which I call Christian Hedonism), there will be an inner strength for ministries of love to the very end.

J. I. Packer described this dynamic in Baxter’s life: “The hope of heaven brought him joy, and joy brought him strength, and so, like John Calvin before him and George Whitefield after him (two verifiable examples) and, it would seem, like the apostle Paul himself...he was astoundingly enabled to labor on, accomplishing more than would ever have seemed possible in a single lifetime.”<sup>4</sup>

But not only does the pursuit of joy in God give strength to endure; it is the key to breaking the power of sin on our way to heaven. Matthew Henry, another Puritan pastor, put it like this: “The joy of the Lord will arm us against

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2. If you wish, you can test this for yourself by consulting the books in which I have tried to apply the vision of this book to the nature of God (*The Pleasures of God*, Multnomah, 2000); the gravity and gladness of preaching (*The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Baker, 2004); the power and the price of world evangelization (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, Baker, 2010); the daily battle against unbelief and sin (*The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*, Multnomah, 1995); the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer (*A Hunger for God*, Crossway, 1997); a hundred practical issues in life and culture (*A Godward Life*, Multnomah, 1997, and *Taste and See*, Multnomah, 2005); the radical call to pastoral ministry (*Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, Broadman & Holman, 2002); the goal of everyday life (*Don’t Waste Your Life*, Crossway, 2003), the ultimate good of the gospel (*God Is the Gospel*, Crossway, 2005), the reality of the new birth (*Finally Alive*, Christian Focus, 2009), and the life of the mind (*Think*, Crossway, 2010).
  3. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978), 17, emphasis added. I have been asked so many times what this “work” looks like, that I wrote another book to answer that question with as many specifics as I could. It is called *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Crossway, 2004) and is meant to be a fuller application of what I have written here.
  4. J. I. Packer, “Richard Baxter on Heaven, Hope, and Holiness,” in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 165.

the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.”<sup>5</sup>

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

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

[God’s] glorifying himself and the saving of his people are not two decrees with God, but one decree, to glorify his mercy in their salvation, though we may say that one is the end of the other: so I think they should be with us together indeed.<sup>6</sup>

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

If God would be pleased to use this book to raise up one man or woman in this line of serious and happy saints who inspired it, then those of us who have rejoiced in the making of this book would delight all the more in the display of God’s grace. It has indeed been a happy work. And my heart overflows to many:

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5. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., orig. 1708), 1096.

6. Richard Baxter, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, abr. John T. Wilkinson (1650; reprint, London: Epworth, 1962), 31.

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

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

The church that I love and serve has made my writing life possible. The partnership that I enjoy with the elders and staff is priceless. There is a chapter yet to be completed. It is called "The Camaraderie of Christian Hedonism." May the Spirit Himself continue to write it on the tablets of our hearts!

The successive editions of this work over the years have been made possible by the skills and insights and labors of Justin Taylor followed by David Mathis. New and better editions would not have been possible without their help.

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

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

*Respectfully with all my heart,  
Johnny*

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

At the dinner table that night (these were the happiest of times in my memory) we would hear about the victories of the gospel. Surely it is more exciting to be the son of an evangelist than to sit with knights and warriors. As I grew older I saw more of the wounds. But he spared me most of that until I was mature enough to “count it all joy.” Holy and happy were those Monday meals. Oh, how good it was to have Daddy home!

*John Piper*

*2011*

*Minneapolis, Minnesota*

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

CHARLES WILLIAMS

*The Place of the Lion*

# HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

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

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

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

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

That's what this book is about.

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

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

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

*The chief end of man is to glorify God*

by

*enjoying Him forever.*

## HOW I BECAME A CHRISTIAN HEDONIST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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3. Pascal, *Pensees*, 113.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## TOWARD A DEFINITION OF CHRISTIAN HEDONISM

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

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

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



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

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

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

*The chief end of man is to glorify God*

by

*enjoying Him forever.*

## THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

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