

When I Don't Desire GOD

BOOKS BY JOHN PIPER

God's Passion for His Glory

The Pleasures of God

Desiring God

The Dangerous Duty of Delight

Future Grace

A Hunger for God

Let the Nations Be Glad!

A Godward Life

A Godward Life, Book Two

Pierced by the Word

Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy

The Hidden Smile of God

The Roots of Endurance

The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God

The Innkeeper

The Prodigal's Sister

Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

What's the Difference?

The Justification of God

Counted Righteous in Christ

Brothers, We Are Not Professionals

The Supremacy of God in Preaching

Beyond the Bounds

Don't Waste Your Life

The Passion of Jesus Christ

Life as a Vapor

A God-Entranced Vision of All Things

When I Don't
Desire
G O D

How to
Fight
for Joy

John Piper

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A DIVISION OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

When I Don't Desire God

Copyright © 2004 by Desiring God Foundation

Published by Crossway Books

A division of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Italics in biblical quotes indicate emphasis added.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from: *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*®, copyright © by The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Scripture references marked KJV are taken from the *King James Version*.

Scripture references marked RSV are taken from the *Revised Standard Version*, copyright © 1946, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

First printing, 2004

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Piper, John, 1946-

When I don't desire God : how to fight for joy / John Piper.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 1-58134-652-2

1. God—Worship and love. 2. Desire for God. 3. Happiness—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Praise of God. I. Title.

BV4817.P57 2004

248.4—dc22

2004016323

RRD 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
KARSTEN AND SHELLY
whose heart as one
“falls hard upon the promises and hopes”

Contents

FOREWORD AND A PRAYER	9
1 WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK <i>Sustaining the Sacrifice of Love</i>	13
2 WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESIRE AND DELIGHT? <i>Discovering How Both and Neither Is the Goal</i>	23
3 THE CALL TO FIGHT FOR JOY IN GOD <i>Taking God's Demand for Delight Seriously</i>	33
4 JOY IN GOD IS A GIFT OF GOD <i>Doing Ourselves What Must Be Done for Us</i>	47
5 THE FIGHT FOR JOY IS A FIGHT TO SEE <i>Valuing God Through the Eyes of the Heart and the Ears of the Head</i>	57
6 FIGHTING FOR JOY LIKE A JUSTIFIED SINNER <i>Learning the Secret of Gutsy Guilt</i>	71
7 THE WORTH OF GOD'S WORD IN THE FIGHT FOR JOY <i>Seeing the Measure of This Mighty Weapon</i>	95
8 HOW TO WIELD THE WORD IN THE FIGHT FOR JOY <i>Musing, Memorizing, and the Message of God</i>	115
9 THE FOCUS OF PRAYER IN THE FIGHT FOR JOY <i>Desiring All Else Only Because We Desire God</i>	137
10 THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER IN THE FIGHT FOR JOY <i>Morning, Noon, and Evening Without Ceasing</i>	155

11	HOW TO WIELD THE WORLD IN THE FIGHT FOR JOY <i>Using All Five Senses to See the Glory of God</i>	175
12	WHEN THE DARKNESS DOES NOT LIFT <i>Doing What We Can While We Wait for God—and Joy</i>	209
	NOTES	235
	DESIRING GOD: A NOTE ON RESOURCES	254
	SCRIPTURE INDEX	255
	PERSON INDEX	263
	SUBJECT INDEX	265

Foreword and a Prayer

I hope you will not be offended if I open this book by praying for you. There is a reason. When all is said and done, only God can create joy in God. This is why the old saints not only pursued joy but *prayed* for it: “Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us” (Ps. 90:15). To be satisfied by the beauty of God does not come naturally to sinful people. By nature we get more pleasure from God’s gifts than from himself. Therefore this book calls for deep and radical change—which only God can give.

But if I didn’t believe God uses means to awaken joy in himself, I would not have written this book. I hope you will read it and that the eyes of your heart will be opened to the infinitely desirable Person of God. He made himself known in his Son, Jesus Christ, who “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). Seeing and savoring this glory is the spring of all endless joy.

Someone asked me why I didn’t put Chapter Twelve at the beginning and then proceed to solve the problem. The title of Chapter Twelve is “When the Darkness Does Not Lift.” The reason is that I am helpless to solve that problem. But God can. And he *will*, in due time, for all who have tasted his saving grace. “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5). And when it comes, it comes from God, not from this book. Chapter Twelve is at the end because when I have done all I can do, the darkness may still not be lifted. I hope you will not despair but will turn to God in prayer. Which is what I do now for you:

Father, I pray that all who’ve read this far will have the motivation and the strength to read on to the end at least as far as would be help-

ful to their faith. I pray that they would read with understanding. And may they be discerning so that, if I have blundered, they would be sure to see the error and not follow me. Protect them from the evil one who would distort and then deceive. Give great assistance from your Spirit, and may they see more truth than I have seen. Oh, that the eyes of their hearts might be bright with the glory of Christ through these pages! Remove every blinding obstacle, and show them your glory! And thus give them more joy than all the gladness that the world can give. And by this joy in Jesus Christ, fit them to love and serve and sacrifice. And by this joy, with which they bear their cross, Lord, cause the earth to know what you are truly worth. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

You had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

HEBREWS 10:34

. . . 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.

HEBREWS 12:2

There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else. . . . It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds, when the mind no longer knows wife or friend or work. . . . All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it.

C. S. LEWIS

*The Problem of Pain*¹

Why I Wrote This Book

Sustaining the Sacrifice of Love



Christian Hedonism is a liberating and devastating doctrine. It teaches that the value of God shines more brightly in the soul that finds deepest satisfaction in him. Therefore it is liberating because it endorses our inborn desire for joy. And it is devastating because it reveals that no one desires God with the passion he demands. Paradoxically, many people experience both of these truths. That certainly is my own experience.

THE LIBERATING AND DEVASTATING DISCOVERY

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.

I discovered what better saints than I have found before me: The full enjoyment of God is my ultimate home, but I am still far off and only on the way. Augustine put it like this in one of his prayers:

I was astonished that although I now loved you . . . I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world . . . as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it.²

HOW CHRISTIAN LIVING BECAME IMPOSSIBLE

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. Once when Jesus' disciples wondered about the salvation of a man who desired money more than God, he said to them, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). 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.

THE MOST COMMON QUESTION I HAVE RECEIVED

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*.³ 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 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. How do you get a desire that you don’t have and you can’t create? Or how do you turn the spark into a flame so that you can be sure it is pure fire?”

CONVERSION IS THE CREATION OF NEW DESIRES

To answer that question, I have written this book. I long to be of help to believers and unbelievers who are seeing some of the radical heart-changes demanded by the Bible in the Christian life—especially that we must desire God more than anything. I am not interested in superficial, external behavior changes, which the Pharisees were so good at. “You Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). These external changes are doable without divine grace.

I would like to help those who are beginning to see that salvation is the awakening of a new taste for God, or it is nothing. “Oh, *taste* and see

that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8). I want to help those who are starting to see that conversion is the creation of new desires, not just new duties; new delights, not just new deeds; new treasures, not just new tasks.

Far and wide people are seeing these truths in the Bible. They are discovering that there is nothing new about Christian Hedonism at all, but that it is simple, old-fashioned, historic, biblical, radical Christian living. It is as old as the psalmists who said to God, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Ps. 51:12) and “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love” (Ps. 90:14).

It’s as old as Jesus, who gave to his people this virtually impossible command for the day of their persecution: “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven” (Luke 6:23).

It’s as old as the early church who “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property,” because they “had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:34).

It’s as old as Augustine who described conversion as the triumph of sovereign joy:

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of *those fruitless joys* which I had once feared to lose . . . ! *You drove them from me*, you who are the true, the *sovereign joy*. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are *sweeter than all pleasure*, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.⁴

It’s as old as John Calvin, the great Reformer of Geneva, who said in his 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that aspiring after happiness in union with God is “the chief activity of the soul.”

If human happiness, whose perfection it is to be united with God, were hidden from man, he would in fact be bereft of the principal use of his understanding. Thus, also the chief activity of the soul is to aspire thither. Hence the more anyone endeavors to approach to God, the more he proves himself endowed with reason.⁵

It’s as old as the Puritans, like Thomas Watson, who wrote in 1692

that God counts himself more glorified when we find more happiness in his salvation:

Would it not be an encouragement to a subject, to hear his prince say to him, You will honor and please me very much, if you will go to yonder mine of gold, and dig as much gold for yourself as you can carry away? So, for God to say, Go to the ordinances, get as much grace as you can, dig out as much salvation as you can; and the more happiness you have, the more I shall count myself glorified.⁶

It's as old as Jonathan Edwards, who argued with all his intellectual might in 1729 that "Persons need not and ought not to set any bounds to their spiritual and gracious appetites." Rather, they ought

to be endeavoring by all possible ways to inflame their desires and to obtain more spiritual pleasures. . . . Our hungerings and thirstings after God and Jesus Christ and after holiness can't be too great for the value of these things, for they are things of infinite value. . . . [Therefore] endeavor to promote spiritual appetites by laying yourself in the way of allurements. . . .⁷ There is no such thing as excess in our taking of this spiritual food. There is no such virtue as temperance in spiritual feasting.⁸

It's as old as Princeton theologian Charles Hodge who argued in the nineteenth century that the true knowledge of Christ includes (and does not just lead to) delight in Christ. This knowledge "is not the apprehension of what he is, simply by the intellect, but also . . . involves not as its consequence merely, but as one of its elements, the corresponding feeling of adoration, *delight, desire and complacency* [= contentment]."⁹

It is as old as the Reformed New Testament scholar Geerhardus Vos, who in the early twentieth century conceded that there is in the writings of the apostle Paul "a spiritualized type of hedonism."

Of course, it is not intended to deny to Paul that transfigured *spiritualized type of "hedonism"* if one prefers so to call it, as distinct from the specific attitude towards life that went in the later Greek philosophy by that technical name. Nothing, not even a most refined Christian experience and cultivation of religion are possible without that. . . . Augustine speaks of this in his *Confessions* in these words:

“For *there exists a delight* that is not given to the wicked, but to those honoring Thee, O God, without desiring recompense, the joy of whom Thou art Thyself! And this is the blessed life, to rejoice towards Thee, about Thee, for Thy sake.” Conf. X, 32.¹⁰

It’s as old as the great C. S. Lewis, who died the same day as John F. Kennedy and had a huge influence on the way I experience nature worshipfully.¹¹

Pleasures are shafts of glory as it strikes our sensibility. . . . But aren’t there bad, unlawful pleasures? Certainly there are. But in calling them “bad pleasures” I take it we are using a kind of shorthand. We mean “pleasures snatched by unlawful acts.” It is the stealing of the apples that is bad, not the sweetness. The sweetness is still a beam from the glory. . . . I have tried since . . . to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration. I don’t mean simply by giving thanks for it. One must of course give thanks, but I meant something different . . . Gratitude exclaims, very properly, “How good of God to give me this.” Adoration says, “What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!” One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun. . . . If this is *Hedonism*, it is also a somewhat arduous discipline. But it is worth some labour.¹²

Lewis was so influential in my understanding of joy and desire and duty and worship that I will add another quotation from him as a tribute to the greatness of his wisdom. I hope my enthusiasm for Lewis will set you to reading him, if you haven’t. He, of course, had his flaws, but few people in the twentieth century had eyes to see what he saw. For example, few saw, as he did, the proper place of duty and delight:

Provided the thing is in itself right, the more one likes it and the less one has to “try to be good,” the better. A *perfect* man would never act from sense of duty; he’d always *want* the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and of other people), like a crutch, which is a substitute for a leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but of course it’s idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits, etc.) can do the journey on their own!¹³

The point of citing all these witnesses is that lots of people, with

good reason, are being persuaded that Christian Hedonism is simple, old-fashioned, historic, biblical, radical Christian living, not some new spiritual technique. They are discovering that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. Which means they are finding that their desires, not just their decisions, really matter. The glory of God is at stake. And many, with tears, want to know: What do I do when I don't desire God? God willing, I would like to help.

IT WILL NOT BE AN EASY JOURNEY TOWARD JOY

I take this task seriously. Our journey in this book is not across easy territory. There are dangers on all sides. Spiritual desires and delights are not commodities to be bought and sold. They are not objects to be handled. They are events in the soul. They are experiences of the heart. They have connections and causes in a hundred directions. They are interwoven with the body and the brain, but are not limited to the physical or mental. God himself, without body or brain, experiences a full array of spiritual affections—love, hate, joy, anger, zeal, etc. Yet our affections are influenced by our bodies and brains. No one but God can get to the bottom of these things. “For the inward mind and heart of a man are deep!” (Ps. 64:6); and not just deep, but depraved: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9).

So the answer to the question, “What should I do when I don't desire God?” is not simple. But it is crucial. The apostle Paul said, “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22). Love is not a mere choice to move the body or the brain. Love is also an experience of the heart. So the stakes are very high. Christ is to be cherished, not just chosen. The alternative is to be cursed. Therefore life is serious. And so is this book.

THE AIM IS NOT TO SOFTEN CUSHIONS, BUT SUSTAIN SACRIFICE

The misunderstanding of this book that I want most to avoid is that I am writing to make well-to-do Western Christians comfortable, as if the joy I have in mind is psychological icing on the cake of already superficial Christianity. Therefore let me say clearly here at the beginning that

the joy I write to awaken is the sustaining strength of mercy, missions, and martyrdom.

Even as I write this sentence Christians are being hacked to death outside Kano, Nigeria. Yesterday a twenty-six-year-old American businessman was beheaded in Iraq by terrorists. Why him? He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This kind of death will increase especially for Christians. In Sudan water is systematically withheld from Christians as they die of thirst and malnutrition, while desperate attempts to visit wells are met with murder, rape, or kidnapping. Fresh reports come every month concerning the destruction of Christian churches and the arrest of pastors in China. In the last decade over five hundred Christian churches have been destroyed in Indonesia. Missionaries are at risk all over the world.

When I address the question, “What should I do if I don’t desire God?” I am addressing the question: “How can I obtain or recover a joy in Christ that is so deep and so strong that it will free me from bondage to Western comforts and security, and will impel me into sacrifices of mercy and missions, and will sustain me in the face of martyrdom?” Persecution is normal for Christians. “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12). “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

In the New Testament this sobering truth does not diminish the focus on joy—it increases it. “We *rejoice* in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance” (Rom. 5:3). “Blessed are you when others . . . persecute you. . . . *Rejoice* and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:11-12). “Count it all *joy*, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Jas. 1:2-3). “They left the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

The fight for joy in Christ is not a fight to soften the cushion of Western comforts. It is a fight for strength to live a life of self-sacrificing love. It is a fight to join Jesus on the Calvary road and stay there with him, no matter what. How was he sustained on that road? Hebrews 12:2 answers, “For the *joy* that was set before him [he] endured the

cross.” The key to endurance in the cause of self-sacrificing love is not heroic willpower, but deep, unshakable confidence that the joy we have tasted in fellowship with Christ will not disappoint us in death. Sacrifices in the path of love were sustained in the New Testament not by willpower, but by joyful hope. “You had compassion on those in prison, and you *joyfully* accepted the plundering of your property, since *you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*” (Heb. 10:34).

The aim of this book is not to salve the conscience of well-to-do Western acquisition. The aim is to sustain love’s ability to endure sacrificial losses of property and security and life, by the power of joy in the path of love. The aim is that Jesus Christ be made known in all the world as the all-powerful, all-wise, all-righteous, all-merciful, all-satisfying Treasure of the universe.

This will happen when Christians don’t just *say* that Christ is valuable, or *sing* that Christ is valuable, but truly experience in their hearts the unsurpassed worth of Jesus with so much joy that they can say, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). Christ will be glorified in the world when Christians are so satisfied in him that they let goods and kindred go and lay down their lives for others in mercy, missions, and, if necessary, martyrdom. He will be magnified most among the nations when, at the moment Christians lose everything on earth, they say, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

“Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:13-14). This we will do for the joy that is set before us. And this joy will hold us and keep us, if we have tasted it and fought to make it the supreme experience of our lives. Christ is supremely glorious and supremely valuable. Therefore he is worth the fight.

It was when I was happiest that I longed most. . . . The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing . . . to find the place where all the beauty came from.

C. S. LEWIS

*Till We Have Faces*¹

The very nature of Joy makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting. There, to have is to want and to want is to have. Thus, the very moment when I longed to be so stabbed again [with Joy], was itself again such a stabbing.

C. S. LEWIS

*Surprised by Joy*²

*O God, you are my God;
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.*

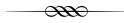
PSALM 63:1

*Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy.*

PSALM 43:4

What Is the Difference Between Desire and Delight?

*Discovering How Both and Neither
Is the Goal*



In this book I will use many words for *joy* without precise distinctions: happiness, delight, pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, desire, longing, thirsting, passion, etc. I am aware that all of these words carry different connotations for different readers. Some people think of *happiness* as superficial and *joy* as deep. Some think of *pleasure* as physical and *delight* as aesthetic. Some think of *passion* as sexual and *longing* as personal. So I signal from the outset that the Bible does not divide its emotional language that way. The same words (desire, pleasure, happiness, joy, etc.) can be positive sometimes and negative sometimes, physical sometimes and spiritual sometimes. That is the approach I take. Any of these words can be a godly experience of the heart, and any of them can be a worldly experience of the heart. I will try to make plain what way the words should be taken in any given context.

But one of the most urgent questions demanded by the title and subtitle of this book is the difference between *desire* and *joy*, or between desire and delight. The title speaks of desire: *When I Don't Desire God*. But the subtitle speaks of joy: *How to Fight for Joy*. How are the two

different and related? The Bible teaches us to *desire* God and to have *joy* in God, or *delight* in God. It illustrates both. Godly people are seen yearning, longing, hungering, thirsting, and fainting for God. They are also seen enjoying, delighting in, and being satisfied in God. So we will look first at how the Bible expresses these two kinds of emotions—desiring and enjoying—and then we will ask what the difference is.

EXAMPLES OF DESIRING GOD

The God-entranced psalmist, Asaph, says, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). Here is a desire for God so strong that it makes all others as nothing. From all the portions that earth and heaven can give, Asaph turns away and says, “God is my portion forever.” Jeremiah said the same: “‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (Lam. 3:24). David, the king, spoke in the same way: “I cry to you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are . . . my portion in the land of the living’” (Ps. 142:5). “I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’ . . . The LORD is my chosen portion” (Ps. 16:2, 5).

The longing psalmist expresses his desire for God with the image of a panting deer: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1). David pours out his heart with similar language: “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. . . . Your steadfast love is better than life” (Ps. 63:1, 3).

The prophet Isaiah from time to time overflowed with words of longing for the Lord: “My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness” (Isa. 26:9). The apostle Paul revealed the depth of his desire for Christ more clearly in his letter to the Philippians than in any other: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. . . . Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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” (Phil. 1:23; 3:7-8).

EXAMPLES OF DELIGHTING IN GOD

One of the most remarkable expressions of delighting or rejoicing in God is found in Habakkuk 3:17-18. My wife Noël and I used this in our wedding ceremony to express our expectation that life would be hard, but that God would be our all-satisfying portion. “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” In other words, when all the supports of human life and earthly happiness are taken away, God will be our delight, our joy. This experience is humanly impossible. No ordinary person can speak in truth like this. If God alone is enough to support joy when all else is lost, it is a miracle of grace.

The psalmists speak repeatedly of the joy, delight, and satisfaction that they have in God. “I will go to the altar of God, to God my *exceeding joy*” (Ps. 43:4). “Let those who *delight* in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad” (Ps. 35:27). “Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who *delight* in them” (Ps. 111:2). “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall *be satisfied* with your likeness” (Ps. 17:15).

In both Old and New Testaments we are commanded to rejoice or delight in the Lord. “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Ps. 37:4). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). 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: “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” (Matt. 13:44).

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESIRE AND DELIGHT?

Now let's bring these two emotions together. On the one hand, we have desiring, yearning, wanting, craving, longing, thirsting, etc., and on the other hand, we have joy, delight, pleasure, gladness, happiness, satisfaction, etc. What is the difference?

The first thought that comes to most of our minds (I tried this on my eight-year-old daughter) is that *delight* (with its synonyms) is what we experience when the thing we enjoy is present, not just future. But *desire* (with its synonyms) is what we experience when the thing we enjoy is not present but, we hope, coming to us in the future.

I think that's true, but oversimplified, for several reasons. One is that many desires are themselves pleasant. That is, the desire is itself a pleasure, not just a longing for a pleasure. Who could draw a line between the power of sexual desire and sexual pleasure? The desire is part of the satisfaction. We speak of climax not because that is the only pleasure, but precisely because it is not the only pleasure. All the desires leading to it and following after it are part of the one big pleasure.

Or who can draw a clear line between the excitement of desire that a child feels just before Daddy gets home and the pleasure the child feels as Daddy walks in the door? The desire is part of the pleasure of Daddy coming home and getting home and being home. So desire is inseparable from pleasure. It is part of it.

Another reason it's an oversimplification to say that in *pleasure* the thing enjoyed is present but in *desire* the thing enjoyed is not yet present is that desire would not exist if the thing enjoyed had not already been tasted. That's how the heart comes to feel something is desirable. Desire is awakened by tastes of pleasure. The taste may be ever so small. But if there is no taste at all of the desirability of something, then there will be no desire for it. In other words, desire is a form of the very pleasure that is anticipated with the arrival of the thing desired. It is, you might say, the pleasure itself experienced in the form of anticipation.

ARE WE ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

There are pointers in the Bible that we are on the right track in these thoughts. For example, not only does the Bible say, "Rejoice in the Lord" (Phil. 3:1), it also says, "We rejoice in *hope* of the glory of God"

(Rom. 5:2). On the one hand, the object of our joy is the Lord, experienced here and now. “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). On the other hand, the object of our joy is future and not yet fully experienced. Nevertheless, even though the object of the joy is future, we hope for it—that is, we desire it with confidence—and this desire is joyful. “We *rejoice* in hope.” The final joy of seeing the glory of God and being swallowed up in it has been tasted, and the desire for it is the very pleasure of that future enjoyment experienced now in the form of anticipation. This is what Paul means by the command, “Rejoice in hope” (Rom. 12:12).

Another evidence that we are on the right track in our understanding of desire and delight is found in the comparison between Psalm 1:2 and Psalm 19:10. Psalm 1:2 says of the man who is blessed, “His *delight* is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Psalm 19:10 says of the words of the Lord, “More to be *desired* are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.” On the one hand, the Word of God is delighted in, and on the other, it is desired.

Yes, the Word of God is desired sometimes because it is not present and we would like to read it or hear it. But it is also true that when it is present and enjoyed, there is also in that very moment a desire for more of the Word and for a fuller understanding and enjoyment of the Word. And even when the Word is absent, the desire for it is also a form of delight in it. There is delight by memory and a delight by anticipation. So desire for and delight in God’s Word are inseparable.

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE MORE OF GOD TO ENJOY

For all these reasons, I will not try to build a wall between desire and delight, or between longing and pleasure. Sometimes I will speak of desiring God and sometimes of delighting in God. Sometimes I will speak of the inconsolable longing for God and sometimes the pleasures at his right hand. 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 a 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.

But the truth that the finite soul will always want more of God than it presently experiences will not be frustrating in the age to come. Then when we are perfected and have our resurrection bodies, the longings that remain will not be because sin is competing with God for our affections. Rather the reason will be that finite minds cannot receive the fullness of infinite greatness and glory. It must be given in (glorious but manageable) increments every day for eternity.

In the age to come, desire for more of God will never be experienced with impatience or ingratitude or frustration. All desire in the age to come will be the sweetest anticipation, rooted ever more deeply in the enlarging memories of joy and in the ever-gathering pleasures of gratitude. God will not take from us the pleasure of anticipated pleasures. He will heighten it. He will give us for all eternity the perfect intermingling of present pleasure and anticipation of future pleasure. Anticipation will be stripped of all frustration. Its ache will be a wholly pleasant ache.

God will be glorified both by the intensity of the present delight that we have in his beauty and by the intensity of the desires we have for more revelation of his fullness. The present pleasures will waken ever fresh desires, and the desires will signal ever greater future pleasures. Pleasures will be perfectly desired, and the desires will be perfectly pleasant.

What we experience here in this fallen age is a partial reflection of

that. This is what we are moving toward. It is not yet here. We know that all too painfully. But our calling here is to fight for joy—ours and the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. The aim is that God’s worth—his infinite desirability—be known and prized and praised in all the world. This is what we mean by God being glorified. He is most glorified in and through his people when we are most satisfied in him. The intensity of our pleasure and our desire bear witness of his worth to the world, especially when we are freed by this (present and hoped for) pleasure to leave the pleasures of this world for a life of sacrifice and love for others.

NEITHER DESIRE NOR DELIGHT IS FINALLY
WHAT WE WANT

It should be obvious from this, but may not be, that desire and delight have this in common: Neither is the Object desired or delighted in. God is. I make this obvious point because all of us from time to time speak loosely and say that the aim of our pursuit is *joy*. Or we say that we want to be happy. Those are not false or evil statements. A Christian means: I aim to pursue joy *in God* so that the infinitely valuable objective reality of the universe, God, will get all the glory possible from my life. “I want to be happy” may be Christian shorthand for “I want to know the One, and the only One, who is in himself all I have ever longed for in all my desires to be happy.”

But the loose way of talking can be misleading. Both ways of saying it can be taken to mean: The object of our wants is ultimately a psychological experience of happiness without any regard to what makes us happy. In other words, they may mean: The final object of our pursuit is joy itself, rather than the beauty of what we find joy in. This is a very common mistake. Jonathan Edwards warned against it by observing that “there are many affections which do not arise from any light in the understanding. And when it is thus, it is a sure evidence that these affections are not spiritual, let them be ever so high.”³ Our goal is not high affections *per se*. Our goal is to see and savor “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The affections that arise from that light *are* spiritual. By this Christ-revealing light, we avoid the mistake of simply pursuing joy, not Christ.

C. S. Lewis devoted most of his autobiography, which he called *Surprised by Joy*, to exposing this error by narrating his own mistakes.

You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment; for in hope we look to hope's object and we interrupt this by (so to speak) turning round to look at the hope itself. . . . The surest means of disarming an anger or a lust was to turn your attention from the girl or the insult and start examining the passion itself. The surest way of spoiling a pleasure was to start examining your satisfaction. . . .

I perceived (and this was the wonder of wonders) that . . . I had been equally wrong in supposing that I desired Joy itself. Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring. And that object, quite clearly, was no state of my own mind or body at all. . . . I asked if Joy itself was what I wanted; and, labeling it "aesthetic experience," had pretended I could answer Yes. But that answer too had broken down. Inexorably Joy proclaimed, "You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you nor any state of you."⁴

WHY THEN MAKE SO MUCH OF FIGHTING FOR JOY?

One might ask, in view of this danger, why I would lay so much stress on joy in the Christian life. Why not just talk about God, the object of joy, and leave the experiences to take care of themselves? There are three answers.

One is this: It is not John Piper who commands us to rejoice in the Lord; God does. God elevates this experience of the heart to the level of command, not I. And he does so with blood-earnestness. "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, . . . you shall serve your enemies" (Deut. 28:47-48). "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy."⁵ The fight for joy is not a warfare I appointed. God did.

The second answer is that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Therefore, to make pretensions about honoring him more, while not calling people to the most radical, soul-freeing satisfaction in God alone, is self-contradictory. It won't happen. God is glorified in his people by the way we *experience* him, not merely by the way we think about him. Indeed the devil thinks more true thoughts about

God in one day than a saint does in a lifetime, and God is not honored by it. The problem with the devil is not his theology, but his desires. Our chief end is to glorify God, the great Object. We do so most fully when we treasure him, desire him, delight in him so supremely that we let goods and kindred go and display his love to the poor and the lost.

The third reason we should make much of joy and the pursuit of joy in God is that people do not awaken to how desperate their condition is until they measure their hearts by Christian Hedonism—or whatever you may call it. I have found for thirty years that preaching and teaching about God's demand that we delight in him more than in anything else breaks and humbles people, and makes them desperate for true conversion and true Christianity. Oh, how easy it is to think we are what we ought to be when the emotions are made peripheral. Mere thoughts and mere deeds are manageable by the carnal religious mind. But the emotions—they are the weathercock of the heart. Nothing shows the direction of the deep winds of the soul like the demand for radical, sin-destroying, Christ-exalting joy in God.

But having made my defense, I say again: God and God alone is the final, ultimate goal of our quest. All that God is for us in Jesus is the Object of our quest for joy. When I speak of fighting for joy, I mean joy in God, not joy without reference to God. When I speak of longing for happiness, I mean happiness in all that God is for us in Jesus, not happiness as physical or psychological experience apart from God. Whether we are desiring or delighting, the end of the experience is God.

Fighting for that experience of God through Jesus Christ is what this book is about.

Always you renounce a lesser good for a greater; the opposite is what sin is. . . . The struggle to submit . . . is not a struggle to submit but a struggle to accept and with passion. I mean, possibly, with joy. Picture me with my ground teeth stalking joy—fully armed too as it's a highly dangerous quest.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

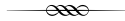
*The Habit of Being*¹

Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:24

The Call to Fight for Joy in God

Taking God's Demand for Delight Seriously



Do these two things really go together? Fighting and joy? Fighting sounds so pressured and violent. Joy sounds more relaxed and peaceful. It just seems strange to talk about *fighting* for joy. You may as well talk about fighting to like hot fudge sundaes. Either you do or you don't, right? What's the fight? No, it's not that simple. Physical tastes like hot fudge vs. caramel are morally neutral. It's not right or wrong to like the one over the other. But having a spiritual taste for the glory of Christ is not morally neutral. Not to have it is evil and deadly. Not to see and savor Christ is an insult to the beauty and worth of his character. Preferring anything above Christ is the very essence of sin. It must be fought.

THE ESSENCE OF EVIL

God defines evil this way when he says, "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" (Jer. 2:13). God pictures himself as a mountain spring of clean, cool, life-giving water. The way to glorify a fountain like this is to enjoy the water, and praise the water, and keep coming back to the water, and

point other people to the water, and get strength for love from the water, and never, never, never prefer any drink in the world over this water. That makes the spring look valuable. That is how we glorify God, the fountain of living water.

But in Jeremiah's day people tasted the fountain of God's grace and did not like it. So they gave their energies to finding better water, more satisfying water. Not only did God call this effort futile ("broken cisterns *that can hold no water*"), but he called it evil: "My people have committed two evils." They put God's perfections to the tongue of their souls and disliked what they tasted; then they turned and craved the suicidal cisterns of the world. That double insult to God is the essence of what evil is.

So preferring the pleasures of money or power or fame or sex over the "pleasures . . . at [God's] right hand" (Ps. 16:11) is not like preferring caramel to hot fudge. It is a great evil. Indeed it is the ultimate meaning of evil. Esteeming God less than anything is the essence of evil.

HEAVEN HANGS ON HAVING THE TASTE OF JOY IN GOD

Therefore, it might not be so strange after all to think of *fighting* for this joy. Our eternal lives depend on it. A person who has no taste for the enjoyment of Christ will not go to heaven. "If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22). "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). Loving Jesus, not just "deciding" for him or "being committed to him" or affirming all the right doctrines about him, is the mark of a true child of God. Jesus said, "If God were your Father, you would love me" (John 8:42).

Yes, I am assuming that loving Jesus includes the taste of joy in his personhood. I reject the notion that love for Christ is identical to mental or physical acts done in obedience to his Word. When Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15), he was describing the *effect* of love, not the essence of love. First there is love, then there is the effect—obedience. The obedience is not identical with love.

Jesus once described his coming like this: "The light has come into

the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Here the issue of salvation is loving or hating the light. Love darkness, or love light. That’s the crisis of the soul. But what is love for darkness? It’s preferring darkness, liking darkness, wanting darkness, running to darkness, being glad with darkness. But all of that is what Jesus demands for himself: “Prefer my light, like my fellowship, want my wisdom, run to my refuge, be glad in my grace. Above all, delight in me as a person.” Look around on all that the world can give; then say with the apostle Paul, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23). That is what it means to love Christ. And to have no love for him is to be accursed.

Surely, then, this is worth fighting for. It may feel strange at first, but when we see what is at stake, no battle will seem more important. Loving Christ involves delight in his Person. Without this love no one goes to heaven. Therefore there is no more important struggle in the universe than the struggle to see and savor Christ above all things—the struggle for joy.

NOT ONLY LOVE, BUT FAITH TOO INCLUDES THE TASTE FOR JOY IN GOD

To make this fight feel even more imperative I will go further and say that not only does *love* to Christ include the taste of joy in his personhood; so does *faith* in Christ. I do not mean that faith and joy are equivalent or identical. Faith in Christ involves more than delighting in Christ. We trust him—bank on him—to be our righteousness and the sacrifice for our sins, and the propitiator of God’s wrath, and our mediator with the Father. Faith depends on Christ alone for all that and more. But it does not involve less than the taste of delight in Christ himself.

Within saving faith there is the necessary element of a pleasing taste for the glory of Christ. Paul describes what happens in conversion as “seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). This is what Satan desperately wants to hide from the eyes of our hearts—a spiritual sight of Christ’s glory in the gospel. Not just facts, but the beauty of the facts. The saving response to this spiritual apprehension of glory in the cross of Christ must include a pleasing sense of Christ’s beauty. It is inconceivable that faith would find Christ dis-

tasteful. It is inconceivable that the regenerate heart could look upon the glory of Christ in the gospel with indifferent or negative affections.

When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; . . . whoever *believes* in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35), he is saying that “believing” in him includes a taste for the living water of his all-satisfying glory, so that the believing heart will never thirst again. That is, faith, having tasted the all-satisfying sweetness of the living Christ, will never forsake him in preference for the broken cisterns of the world. There may be temporary strays and backslidings. There may be great soul-conflict. But once the soul has truly tasted the water of life and the bread of heaven, it will never finally forsake the Lord.

Believing means trusting Jesus not only as our all-sovereign Lord and all-sufficient Savior, but also as our all-surpassing Treasure. Trusting in Christ as our Treasure means seeing and savoring him as a Treasure. Christ is not our Treasure if we do not treasure him. And treasuring something means being glad to have it. Therefore saving faith involves no less than being glad to have Jesus himself for who he is.

It could not be otherwise, if the aim of God is to glorify his Son. If Christ is followed only because his gifts are great and his threats are terrible, he is not glorified by his followers. A defective lord can offer great gifts and terrible threats. And a person may want the gifts, fear the threats, and follow a lord whom they despise or pity or find boring or embarrassing, in order to have the gifts and avoid the threats. If Christ is to be glorified in his people, their following must be rooted not mainly in his promised gifts or threatened punishments, but in his glorious Person. Oh, it is true that “Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them” (Ps. 111:2). I do not minimize the joy of seeing the works of the Lord. But his works are great because the Lord is great. And they will become idols of delight unless they point us to the Lord himself as our highest delight. The faith that honors Christ is the faith that sees and savors his glory in all his works, especially the gospel.

THE CALL TO FIGHT FOR THIS

This means that the biblical passages that speak of the fight of faith apply to the fight for joy. In his first letter to Timothy Paul tells him, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which

you were called” (6:12). Faith is something that must be fought for, if it is to thrive and survive. This is how we take hold on eternal life—by fighting to maintain faith, with its joy in Christ. Satan seeks more than anything to destroy our faith. You can hear this in 1 Thessalonians 3:5, where Paul says, “When I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your *faith*, for fear that somehow *the tempter* had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” In other words, their *faith* is what Satan targets. If faith is going to endure, with its joy in God, we must fight.

WHAT WE HAVE LOST IN THE WESTERN CHURCH

One of the reasons that today in the Western church our joy is so fragile and thin is that this truth is so little understood—the truth, namely, that eternal life is laid hold of only by a persevering fight for the joy of faith. Joy will not be rugged and durable and deep through suffering where there is not resolve to fight for it. But today, by and large, there is a devil-may-care, cavalier, superficial attitude toward the ongoing, daily intensity of personal joy in Christ, because people do not believe that their eternal life depends on it.

The last two hundred years has seen an almost incredible devaluation of the fight for joy. We have moved a hundred miles from *Pilgrim’s Progress* where Christian labors and struggles and fights all his life “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2) in the Celestial City. Oh, how different is the biblical view of the Christian life than the one prevalent in the Western church. It is an earnest warfare from beginning to end, and the war is to defend and strengthen the fruit-bearing fields of joy in God.

James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” The person who will receive the crown of eternal life is the person who successfully endures trial—that is, the person who fights for joy in the pain of loss and gets the victory over the unbelief of anger and bitterness and discouragement.

Revelation 2:10 says to those who are being thrown in prison for their faith, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This is very different from the mood of Western Christianity. Here something infinite and eternal hangs on whether these Christians hold fast to

the joy of faith while in prison. But today worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and fellowship gatherings in many churches do not have a spirit of earnestness and intensity and fervor and depth because people do not really believe that anything significant is at stake in the fight for joy—least of all their eternal life. The all-important priority seems to be cheerfulness, even jollity.

Oh, that the church would waken to the warfare we are in and feel the urgency of the fight for joy. This is how we hold fast to eternal life. “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:12). Faith has in it the taste of joy in the glory of Christ. Therefore the good fight of faith is the fight for joy.

A GOOD FIGHT

It will help us fight for joy if we realize why Paul calls it a *good* fight. First, it is a good fight because the enemy of our joy is evil. The enemy is unbelief, and the satanic forces behind it, and the sins that come from it. When you set yourself to combat the forces that try to make you delight in yourself or your accomplishments or your possessions more than in God, you oppose a very evil enemy. Therefore it is a good fight.

Second, it is a good fight because we are not left to our own strength in the fight. If we were, as Martin Luther says, “Our striving would be losing.” In other words, when a child of God fights for joy in God, God himself is the one behind that struggle, giving the will and the power to defeat the enemy of joy (Phil. 2:12-13). We are not left to ourselves to sustain the joy of faith. God fights for us and in us. Therefore the fight of faith is a good fight.

Third, it is a good fight because it is not a struggle to carry a burden, but a struggle to let a burden be carried for us. The life of joy in God is not a burdened life. It is an unburdened life. The fight for joy is the struggle to trust God with the burdens of life. It's a fight for freedom from worry. It's a fight for hope and peace and joy, which are all threatened by unbelief and doubt about God's promises. And since freedom and hope and peace and joy are good, the fight to preserve them is a good fight.

Fourth, the fight of faith is good because, unlike most fights, it does

not involve self-exaltation but self-humbling. Most fighting is not good because it is a proud attempt to prove our own strength at someone else's expense. But the fight for joy is just the opposite. It's a way of saying that we are weak and desperately need the mercy of God. By nature we do not like to admit our helplessness. We do not like to say, "Apart from Christ I can do nothing—I cannot even rejoice" (see John 15:5). But the very essence of faith is the admission of our sinful helplessness in the quest for eternal joy, and looking away from ourselves to God through Christ for the help and the joy that is in him alone. This kind of humility is good. Therefore the fight for joy is a good fight.

Fifth, the fight for joy is good because by it God is greatly glorified. When we devote ourselves to resist the idolatrous power of every craving, every desire, every pleasure that is not God, then God is exalted as the superior Treasure of our lives. Fighting against all alien joy shows that we know the infinite worth of God. Therefore the fight for joy is a good fight.

At the end of his life Paul said, "I have *fought the good fight*, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). Keeping the faith for a lifetime is the result of fighting the good fight for a lifetime. And if faith includes at least the taste of joy in the glory of Christ, then this life-long fight is a fight for joy—a very good fight.

PAUL'S MINISTRY: WORKING FOR OUR JOY

It's no surprise, then, that Paul conceived of his entire ministry as helping people fight for joy. He says as much in two places. In 2 Corinthians 1:24 he says, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy." Notice two things. One is how joy and faith are almost interchangeable: "We don't lord it over your *faith*; we work with you for your *joy*." You would have expected him to say, "We work with you for your *faith*." But he says he works for their *joy*. That is what I am trying to do in this book. That is what I try to do every Sunday in the pulpit. That is what we should do for each other every day (Heb. 3:12-13). Maintaining joy in God takes "work"; that is, it's a fight against every impulse for alien joys and every obstacle in the way to seeing and savoring Christ.

The other place where Paul speaks of his calling in this way is

Philippians 1:25. He is wrestling with two competing desires: to depart and be with Christ, or to stay and minister to the churches. He concludes, “I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and *joy in the faith*.” In other words, he expresses the summary of his ministry on earth as working to advance their joy! It is remarkable that Paul would sum up his entire ministry as working for our joy. So we should not draw back at the summons to work and fight for joy in God.

BACK TO THE TENSION BETWEEN FIGHTING AND REJOICING

Now back to the question we began with: Do fighting and joy go together? I've tried to address one issue, namely, that the stakes are so high we should not be surprised that we must fight. Our souls hang in the balance. So I hope it sounds more fitting and crucial now when the summons comes: Take up arms and fight for joy in God. A manual in that war is what this book aims to be.

But another thing that makes fighting and joy seem incompatible is that joy is spontaneous and fighting is planned. Joy happens in the heart spontaneously. You don't get up in the morning feeling blue and then immediately experience joy simply because you decide to. If you are tired when you wake up, you can force yourself to throw your legs out of bed. But if you are gloomy and discouraged when you wake up, you cannot just start feeling happy. Joy is not in the power of the will the way physical motion is.

So how does the intentionality of the fight relate to the spontaneity of the joy? This is virtually the same question that I posed in the previous chapter and promised to try to answer here: How does the fact that joy is a free gift of God relate to our responsibility to have it?² One of the reasons we experience joy in God as spontaneous is that it's a gift. And one of the reasons we must fight for it is that we are responsible to have it. So the questions are virtually the same: How do we fight for something that is spontaneous? And, what can we do to obtain a totally free gift?

This entire book is meant as an answer to that question, but here I will simply offer a broad summary answer in three parts.

THE FIGHT ITSELF IS A GIFT

First, we embrace the truth that not only our joy in God, but also the fight for joy itself is a gift of God. In other words, God works in us to enable us to fight. Embracing this truth prevents us from thinking that the joy we fight for is ultimately our achievement. Joy remains a gift and continues to be spontaneous, even though we ourselves are engaged in its cause.

The evidence for this point is found in numerous biblical texts. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul says, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” Paul worked hard. He did not say that God’s grace made his work unnecessary. He said God’s grace made his work possible. He worked, but “it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” So the fight for joy is our fight, and we are responsible to do it. But when we have fought for joy with all our might, we say with the apostle Paul, “it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” It was a gift.

Philippians 2:12-13 describes how Christian work is enabled by the work of God within us. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God’s work in us does not eliminate our work; it enables it. We work *because* he is the one at work in us. Therefore, the fight for joy is possible because God is fighting for us and through us. All our efforts are owing to his deeper work in and through our willing and working. This is why I say our fight for joy is a gift of God.

The same thing could be shown from Hebrews 13:20-21: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” God works in us that which is pleasing in his sight. The fight for joy is owing to his working in us. When all is said and done, Paul says, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me” (Rom. 15:18). In this way the gift of joy remains a gift and remains spontaneous, even though we

fight for it. All our fighting is a work of God, and when a work of God brings about joy in God, the joy is manifestly a gift.

WE FIGHT TO PUT OURSELVES IN THE GOD-ORDAINED
PATH OF BLESSING

Second, we understand that our fight for joy does not coerce God to give the gift of joy, but puts us in the path where he has ordained the blessing to come. I say it carefully, lest I sound as though joy can be demanded from the Almighty. It is a fruit of the Spirit that grows on the tree of faith (Gal. 5:22); it is not a wage God must pay for our work or for our fight. That God ordinarily gives joy when we walk in certain paths is no guarantee that he will do so according to our timetable.

We are like farmers. They plow the field and plant the seed and cut away weeds and scare away crows, but they do not make the crop grow. God does. He sends rain and sunshine and brings to maturity the hidden life of the seed. We have our part. But it is not coercive or controlling. And there will be times when the crops fail. Even then God has his ways of feeding the farmer and bringing him through a lean season.

We must learn to wait for the Lord. King David gave us an example of this in Psalm 40. “I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” (vv. 1-3). Here is a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), who spent time in “the pit of destruction” and in “the miry bog”—where there was no song in his mouth. How long was he there? We are not told. What matters is what he did there. He waited for the Lord. He could not make the Lord come. He *could* wait and hope and trust that he would come. And he did come. He put David’s feet on a rock and put a new song in his mouth.

Georg Neumark (1621-1681), the German hymn-writer, expressed this humble position in his great hymn, “If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee”:

*God knows the time for joy and truly
Will send it when he sees it meet
When He has tried and purged thee duly*

*And found thee free from all deceit.
He comes to thee all unaware
And makes thee own His loving care.*³

Two hundred years later Karolina Wilhelmina Sandell-Berg (1832-1903), known as the Fanny Crosby of Sweden because of the 650 hymns that she wrote, expressed the same humility under the mighty hand of God. In one of her best-known hymns, “Day by Day,” she wrote:

*He Whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what He deems best—
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.*⁴

In obedience to God’s Word we should fight to walk in the paths where he has promised his blessings. But when and how they come is God’s to decide, not ours. If they delay, we trust the wisdom of our Father’s timing, and we wait. In this way joy remains a gift, while we work patiently in the field of obedience and fight against the weeds and the crows and the rodents. Here is where joy will come. Here is where Christ will reveal himself (John 14:21). But that revelation and that joy will come when and how Christ chooses. It will be a gift.

WE FIGHT TO SEE

Third, we understand that the fight for joy is first and always a fight to see. Seeing the glory of Jesus Christ in the gospel awakens joy. And joy in Christ magnifies his worth. That is why Satan aims chiefly at blinding us from seeing Christ for who he is. He hates to see Christ honored. And Christ is mightily honored when the sight of his glory gives rise to the kind of gladness that cuts the nerve of sin and causes radical sacrifice in the cause of the gospel.

Paul tells us about this design of Satan in 2 Corinthians 4:4: “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.” If joy in Christ, with all the risk-taking love that flows from it, is to be stopped, then seeing the glory of Christ must be blocked. That is Satan’s chief employment.

When we understand that seeing Christ is what leads to enjoying Christ, and that therefore the fight for joy is mainly a fight to see, we grasp how the fight does not undermine the fact that joy is a gift and a spontaneous experience. The joy that comes from seeing beauty is spontaneous no matter how hard one fought to see. The fighting does not cause the joy. Seeing causes the joy. And it does so freely. There is no coercion. No one stands before a beautiful sunrise and says, "Now I worked hard to get up this early; you owe me happiness by your bright colors." No. We stand there, and in humility we receive. And if the joy comes, it is a gift.

The essence of the Christian life is learning to fight for joy in a way that does not replace grace. We must be able to say at the end of our lives, "I have fought the good fight." But we must also say, "It was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." I have pursued Christ as my joy with all my might. But it was a might that he mightily imparted. We must fight for joy in such a way that we prove Jesus true when he said, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). We will succeed in this battle when we can say with Paul in Colossians 1:29 that we are "struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." We struggle to bear the burden and carry the yoke. But he gives the power. All burdens are light to him. All yokes are easy to him. This too is something glorious to see in him. This too makes us glad in him. Trust him for this. Our joy in him will be the greater because we see him as the one who gives both the joy and the strength to fight for it.