

JOHN PIPER

120 DAILY MEDITATIONS

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Showing the Supremacy of God in All of Life

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To those who long for a satisfied soul.

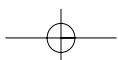
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love.

PSALM 90:14



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A WORD TO THE READER

One of the reasons I put together collections of short meditations is that my life has been changed as much by paragraphs as by books. Books on one topic are valuable. They let the author explore all the angles of an insight. But where do the insights themselves come from? Usually they come from paragraphs. Even sentences. For reasons not entirely explainable, God can make a single paragraph life changing.

Perhaps some evening your soul is hungry. Not for anything in particular, just a soul-hunger. A longing. Something is needed beyond what television is going to give. Something about God, or about the meaning of your life, or about eternity. You're tired and you know that you probably can't stay awake to read twenty pages. So you pick up a book that you know focuses on eternal things, a Godward book. And three minutes later you have seen something, and you will never be the same again.

It may take a lifetime to sound the depths of what you just saw. But the seeing happens in an instant. It's as if God takes the paragraph in his fingers and uses it to adjust the lens on the eye of your soul, and something wonderful comes into focus that you had never seen before.

Isn't it amazing to think about the relationship between God's focusing fingers and the human activity of writing and reading? You may have read that same paragraph before—perhaps just the other evening. But this time, God put his fingers on it and turned the lens just one more focusing notch. What this means is that I should pray as a writer, and you should pray as a reader. We should ask God to do this focusing.

I think of your reading and my writing as a kind of partnership in the pursuit of a Godward miracle. I write, you read, but God gives the

sight. What we both want is this miracle of seeing—seeing life-changing things about God and life and eternity.

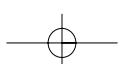
In one of his letters, the apostle Paul said, “By reading you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:4, author’s translation). But was reading enough? A few sentences later he prayed, “That you may have strength to...know the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18–19). Something more was needed than reading. Something from God—he called it “strength to know.” Earlier he had prayed that the eyes of his readers’ hearts would be “enlightened that you may know” (Ephesians 1:18). Something from God is needed—in answer to prayer. This is what I meant when I said that God takes a human paragraph and puts his fingers on the lens of the eye of your soul. The slightest turn, and we are made strong with sight. We are never the same again.

So I have written. And you are reading. And God is ready to act. My words are not Scripture. They are not infallible like God’s words. But my earnest aim in all I write is to be faithful to God’s written Word in the Bible. To point to God and his Son and his works and his ways. My aim is a Godward book in the hope that God would put his fingers on its paragraphs and turn the lens of the eye of your soul, ever so delicately, and bring glories into focus.

This is how God forms us into his image. “Beholding the glory of the Lord, [we] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is our aim: from a Godward paragraph, to a sight of glory, to *A Satisfied Soul*.



I have enjoyed a long and happy relationship with Multnomah Books—especially in bringing my shorter writings to publication. *A Satisfied Soul* is a continuation of what we began in *A Godward Life, Book One* (2001, 2015), and continued in *A Godward Life, Book Two* (2003, which became *Taste and See*, 2005, 2016), *Pierced by the Word* (2003), *Life as a Vapor* (2004), and *A Godward Heart* (2014).



A Satisfied Soul is now the third volume of 120 (or more) readings, alongside *A Godward Life* and *Taste and See*. The three together combine for 365 daily readings, one for every day of the year, if you like. This new volume is a compilation of the three previously published smaller books (*Pierced by the Word*, *Life as a Vapor*, and *A Godward Heart*). Multnomah and the team at Desiring God thought it would serve readers to bring those three smaller devotionals together in this one volume to complement *A Godward Life* and *Taste and See*. I am thankful for this publishing partnership for the sake of spreading what I pray will prove to be life-changing, Christ-exalting paragraphs.

1

THE MORNING I HEARD THE VOICE OF GOD

When God's Word Gets Personal

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

I couldn't sleep for some reason. I was at Shalom House in northern Minnesota on a staff couples' retreat. It was about 5:30 in the morning. I lay there, wondering if I should get up or wait till I got sleepy again. In his mercy, God moved me out of bed. It was mostly dark, but I managed to find my clothing, get dressed, grab my briefcase, and slip out of the room without waking up Noël. In the main room below, it was totally quiet. No one else seemed to be up. So I sat down on a couch in the corner to pray.

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

was a sweetness about it. Time seemed to matter little. God was near. He had me in his sights. He had something to say to me. When God draws near, hurry ceases. Time slows down.

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

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

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

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

This was breathtaking. It was very serious. It was almost a rebuke, at

least a warning. He may as well have taken me by the collar of my shirt, lifted me off the ground with one hand, and said with an incomparable mixture of fierceness and love, "Never, never, never exalt yourself. Never rebel against me."

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

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

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

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

And best of all, they are available to all. If you would like to hear the very same words I heard on the couch in northern Minnesota, read Psalm 66:5–7. That is where I heard them. Oh how precious is the Bible. It is the very Word of God. In it God speaks in the twenty-first century.

This is the very voice of God. By this voice, he speaks with absolute truth and personal force. By this voice, he reveals his all-surpassing beauty. By this voice, he reveals the deepest secrets of our hearts. No voice anywhere anytime can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible.

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

The great need of our time is for people to experience the living reality of God by hearing his word personally and “transformingly” in Scripture. Something is incredibly wrong when words that claim to be from God from outside Scripture are more powerful and more affecting to us than the inspired Word of God.

Let us cry with the psalmist, “Incline my heart to your testimonies” (Psalm 119:36). “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18). Grant that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened to know our hope and our inheritance and the love of Christ that passes knowledge and be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 1:18; 3:19). *O God, don't let us be so deaf to your Word and so unaffected with its ineffable, evidential excellency that we celebrate lesser things.*

2

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SEEK THE LORD?

A Meditation on Psalm 105:4

*Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his presence continually!*

—PSALM 105:4

Seeking the Lord means seeking his presence. *Presence* is a common translation of the Hebrew word for “face.” Literally, we are to seek his face. But this is the Hebraic way of having access to God. To be before his face is to be in his presence.

But aren’t his children always in his presence? Yes and no. Yes in two senses: First, it’s yes in the sense that God is omnipresent and therefore always near everything and everyone. “He upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). His power is ever present in sustaining and governing all things.

And second, yes, he is always present with his children in the sense of his covenant commitment to always stand by us and work for us and turn everything for our good. “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

But there is a sense in which God’s presence is not with us always. For this reason, the Bible repeatedly calls us to “seek the Lord...seek his

presence continually.” God’s *manifest, conscious, trusted* presence is not our constant experience. There are seasons when we become neglectful of the Lord and give him no thought and do not put trust in him, and we find him “unmanifested”—that is, unperceived as great and beautiful and valuable by the eyes of our hearts.

His face—the brightness of his personal character—is hidden behind the curtain of our carnal desires. This condition is always ready to overtake us. That is why we are told to “seek his presence *continually*.” God calls us to enjoy continual consciousness of his supreme greatness and beauty and worth.

This happens through seeking. Continual seeking. But what does that mean practically? Both the Old and New Testaments say it means to set the mind and heart on God. It is the conscious fixing or focusing of our mind’s attention and our heart’s affection on God.

Now set *your mind and heart* to seek the Lord your God.

(1 Chronicles 22:19)

If then you have been raised with Christ, *seek* the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds* on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

(Colossians 3:1–2)

This setting of the mind is the opposite of mental coasting. It is a conscious choice to direct the heart toward God. That is what Paul prayed for the church: “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ” (2 Thessalonians 3:5). It is a conscious effort on our part. But that effort to seek God is a gift from God.

We do not make this mental and emotional effort to seek God because he is lost. That’s why we would seek a coin or a sheep. But God is not lost. Nevertheless, there is always something through which or around which we must go to meet him consciously. This going through or around is

what seeking is. He is often hidden. Veiled. We must go through mediators and around obstacles.

The heavens are telling the glory of God. So we can seek him through that. He reveals himself in his Word. So we can seek him through that. He shows himself to us in the evidences of grace in other people. So we can seek him through that. The seeking is the conscious effort to get through the natural means to God himself—to constantly set our minds toward God in all our experiences, to direct our minds and hearts toward him through the means of his revelation. This is what seeking God means.

And there are endless obstacles we must get around in order to see him clearly, and so that we can be in the light of his presence. We must flee every spiritually dulling activity. We must run from it and get around it. It is blocking our way.

We know what makes us vitally sensitive to God's appearances in the world and in the Word. And we know what dulls us and blinds us and makes us not even want to seek him. These things we must move away from and go around if we would see God. That is what seeking God involves.

And as we direct our minds and hearts Godward in all our experiences, we cry out to him. This too is what seeking him means.

Seek the LORD while he may be found; *call* upon him while he is near. (Isaiah 55:6)

Seek God and *plead* with the Almighty for mercy. (Job 8:5)

Seeking involves calling and pleading. *O Lord, open my eyes. O Lord, pull back the curtain of my own blindness. Lord, have mercy and reveal yourself. I long to see your face.*

The great obstacle to seeking the Lord is pride. "In the *pride* of his face the wicked does *not seek* him" (Psalm 10:4). Therefore, humility is essential to seeking the Lord.

The great promise to those who seek the Lord is that he will be found. “If you seek him, he will be found by you” (1 Chronicles 28:9). And when he is found, there is great reward. “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that *he rewards those who seek him*” (Hebrews 11:6). God himself is our greatest reward. And when we have him, we have everything. Therefore, “Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!”

3

GLORIFYING THE GRACE OF GOD

Why Everything Exists

One of the main points of a short book I wrote, called *Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ* (Crossway, 2008), is that sin and God's wrath against it were part of God's plan when he created the world. This is different from saying that God sins or that he approves of sinning.

The main reason for making this point is to exalt the revelation of God's grace in the crucifixion of Jesus to the highest place. This is the point of the universe: the glorification of the grace of God in the apex of its expression in the death of Jesus.

Jesus died for sin (1 Corinthians 15:3). The death of Jesus for sin was planned before the foundation of the world. We know this because the book of Revelation refers to names written "before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain" (Revelation 13:8), and because Paul tells us that God saved us by "grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Timothy 1:9).

Therefore, since Christ was slain for sin, and since grace is God's response to sin, we know that sin was part of the plan from the beginning. God carries this plan through in a way that maintains full human accountability, full hatred for sin, full divine justice, and full saving love for all who trust Christ. And we don't need to know *how* he does it to believe it and rest in it and worship him for it.

Recently I was pondering Ezra 8 and 9. I saw there another pointer to the truth of God's planning for human sin and divine wrath.

Ezra said, "The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and *the power of his wrath* is against all who *forsake him*" (Ezra 8:22). This text leads me to ask, Did God know before creation that his creatures would "forsake him"? Yes, he did. The plan for their redemption was in place before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3–6).

Was Ezra 8:22 true before the foundation of the world? Yes, it was. God did not become holy only after creation. He has always been holy and just. "The power of his wrath is against all who forsake him" because this is, and always has been, the holy and just thing for God to do.

Therefore, since God knew that his creatures would forsake him, he also knew that his power and wrath would be against them. Therefore, this was part of his plan. I'm not saying that *foreknowledge* is the same as *preplanning*. But I am saying that if God knew something would happen and he went ahead to put things in place that let it happen, then he does so for reasons. He does not act on a whim. And those reasons are what I mean by *plan*. He created the world knowing that sin would happen and that he would respond as Ezra 8:22 says he does. And thus he planned for it.

This planning is what Paul meant in Romans 9:22 when he said that God was "desiring to show his *wrath* and to make known his *power*." And if you ask Paul why God would go forward with this plan, his most ultimate answer is in the next verse: "In order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy" (Romans 9:23).

God knew that the revelation of his wrath and power against sin would make the riches of his glory shine all the brighter and taste all the sweeter for the vessels of mercy.

"The riches of his glory" are the riches we inherit when we see his glory in all the fullness that we can bear (Ephesians 1:18) and are transformed by it (Romans 8:30; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2). These riches of glory reach their supreme height of wonder and beauty in the

death of Jesus as he bore the condemnation of God's wrath and power in our place (Romans 8:3; Galatians 3:13).

In other words, God's plan that there be sin and wrath in the universe was ultimately to bring about "the praise of his glorious grace" in the death of Christ (Ephesians 1:6).

What is at stake in the sovereignty of God over sin is the ultimate aim of the universe, namely, the exaltation of the Son of God in the greatest act of wrath-removing, sin-forgiving, justice-vindicating grace that ever was or ever could be. The praise of the glory of God's grace in the death of Christ for sinners is the ultimate goal of all things.

This elevates Christ to the supreme place in the universe. When Paul said, "All things were created...for him" (Colossians 1:16), he meant that the entire universe and all the events in it serve to glorify Jesus Christ. And the apex of his glory is the glory of his grace, most clearly seen in his death for sinners like us.

Oh, that God would make the meditations of our hearts go ever deeper into this mystery. And may the words of our mouths and the actions of our hands serve to magnify the infinite worth of Jesus and his death. This is why we exist.

4

How Is God's PASSION FOR HIS GLORY NOT SELFISHNESS?

The Source and Sum of Our Joy

The Bible is laden with God's self-exaltation. Repeatedly he says things like, "For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" (Isaiah 48:11). A major question people have when they hear biblical texts about God's passion for his own glory is, How is this not a sinful form of narcissism and megalomania? The answer is that God's passion for his glory is the essence of his love to us. But narcissism and megalomania are not love.

God's love for us is not mainly his making much of us, but his giving us the ability to enjoy making much of him forever. In other words, God's love for us keeps God at the center. God's love for us exalts his value and our satisfaction in it. If God's love made us central and focused mainly on our value, it would distract us from what is most precious, namely, himself.

Love labors and suffers to enthrall us with what is infinitely and eternally satisfying: God. Therefore, God's love labors and suffers to break our bondage to the idol of self and focus our affections on the treasure of God.

To see the God-centeredness of God's love demonstrated in Christ, look with me at the story of Lazarus's sickness and death:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, [therefore] when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. (John 11:1–6)

Notice three amazing things:

1. Jesus chose to let Lazarus die. Verse 6 says, "When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." There was no hurry. His intention was not to spare the family grief but to raise Lazarus from the dead.
2. He was motivated by a passion for the glory of God displayed in his own glorious power. Verse 4 says, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."
3. Nevertheless, both the decision to let Lazarus die and the motivation to magnify God were expressions of love for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Verses 5–6 says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So...he stayed...where he was."

Oh, how many people today—even Christians—would murmur at Jesus for callously letting Lazarus die and putting him and Mary and Martha and others through the pain of those days. And if they saw that this was motivated by Jesus' desire to magnify the glory of God, many would call this harsh or unloving.

What this shows is how far above the glory of God most people value pain-free lives. For most people, love is whatever puts human value and human well-being at the center. So Jesus' behavior is scarcely intelligible to them.

But let us not tell Jesus what love is. Let us not instruct him how he should love us and make us central. Instead, let us learn from Jesus what love is and what our true well-being is.

Love is doing whatever you need to do, even to the point of dying on the cross, to help people see and savor the glory of God forever and ever. Love keeps God central, because the soul was made for God.

The mission statement of my life goes like this: I exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. People have asked me, “Shouldn’t love be part of it?” My answer to those folks is that this mission statement *is* my definition of love.

Jesus confirms that we are on the right track here by the way he prays for us in John 17. I assume he is indeed praying for us because he says in verse 20, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.” And I hope we would all agree that this prayer is an expression of his love for us (John 13:1). Consider how Jesus prays in the first five verses of John 17:

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

This is the way the Son of God prays when he is loving his people. He prays that his glory be upheld and displayed.

The connection with us comes in verse 24, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my

glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” The love of Jesus drives him to pray for us and then die for us, *not* that our value may be central, but that his glory may be central and that we may see it and savor it for all eternity. “To see my glory that you have given me”—for that, he let Lazarus die and for that he went to the cross.

The apostle Paul offered one illustration of God loving us this way:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7–10)

Jesus’ answer to Paul’s plea that the painful thorn be removed was no. The reason he gave to help Paul accept this answer was, “My power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9). In other words, he was saying it was more loving for him to help Paul value the glory of his power than it was for him to take away his thorn.

Many less-God-centered Christians, I fear, would not be happy with that answer. I have heard Christians say, in so many words, “This hurts and you can’t be loving if you are going to subject me to this for the rest of my life.” In other words, God’s love is defined as what brings them the relief they want and makes them, not the glory of Christ, central.

Paul’s response was very different: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (v. 9).

Oh, how we need to see that Christ, not comfort, is our all-satisfying and everlasting treasure. So I conclude that magnifying the supremacy of God in all things and being willing to suffer patiently to help people see and savor this supremacy is the essence of love. It's the essence of God's love. And it's the essence of our love for people. Because the supremacy of God's glory is the source and sum of all full and lasting joy.

5

GALATIANS 4:18 AND “BEING MADE MUCH OF”

Our Satisfaction in God’s Supremacy

Galatians 4:18 seems to be in tension with what I often say about “being made much of.” I ask, Do I feel more loved by God because he makes much of me, or because, at great cost to himself, he frees me to enjoy making much of him forever?

The point of that question is to expose the deepest foundation of our happiness. Is it God or me?

- Is the deepest basis of my joy God’s greatness or my greatness?
- Am I more satisfied praising him or being praised?
- Am I God-centered because of his surpassing value, or am I God-centered because he highlights my surpassing value?
- Would it be heaven to me to see God or to be God?

In other words, the aim of that provocative question is not to deny that God does indeed make much of us in many ways, but rather to make sure he is kept supreme and central in his own love for us instead of making ourselves the supreme value in God’s love.

In Galatians, Paul was warning the church that the Judaizers were seeking to win them over in subtle ways. He said, “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you” (Galatians 4:17–18).

I am not happy with this translation of that passage, even though I am very happy with the overall translation of the English Standard Version. “Make much of” is not a close rendering of the Greek word *zelōō*, which usually carries the sense of “desire” or “long for” in a fairly strong way, either positively (zeal) or negatively (jealousy).

Here are three examples of the Greek word used as “bad desire,” such as jealousy, envy, or covetousness:

- “The patriarchs, jealous (*zēlōsantes*) of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him” (Acts 7:9).
- “Love does not envy (*zēloī*) or boast” (1 Corinthians 13:4).
- “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet (*zēlōute*) and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:2).

Here are two examples of the Greek word used as “good desire,” like longing for, or proper jealousy, like God’s:

- “Earnestly desire (*zēlōute*) the higher gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31).
- “I feel a divine jealousy (*theou zelō*) for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2).

In view of this meaning, the New American Standard Bible has, I think, a better translation of the Galatians passage: “They *eagerly seek* you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will *seek* them. But it is good always to *be eagerly sought* in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you” (Galatians 4:17–18).

So the point of verse 18 is not that we should seek to be “made much of” but that we should act in such a way that, if we are *eagerly sought* out, it will be because our behavior is admirable. It is a good thing when people want to be around us or to imitate us because we follow Christ. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

The aim is not to be made much of but to draw people into our passion for making much of Christ. So I don’t think Galatians 4:17–18 is in tension with my question, “Do I feel more loved by God because he

makes much of me, or because, at great cost to himself, he frees me to enjoy making much of him forever?" That question aims to accomplish the same thing as these verses. It aims to make God's worth the supreme value in the universe and to show that his love for us is supremely his helping us be satisfied in that forever.

6

“I LOVE JESUS CHRIST”

An Unforgettable Moment in Seminary

One of the most memorable moments of my seminary days was during the school year 1968–69 at Fuller Seminary on the third level of the classroom building just after a class on systematic theology. A group of us were huddled around James Morgan, the young theology teacher who was saying something about the engagement of Christians in social justice. I don’t remember what I said, but he looked me right in the eye and said, “John, I love Jesus Christ.”

It was like a thunderclap in my heart. A strong, intelligent, mature, socially engaged man had just said out loud in front of a half-dozen men, “I love Jesus Christ.” He was not preaching. He was not pronouncing on any issue. He was not singing in church. He was not trying to get a job. He was not being recorded. He was telling me that he loved Jesus.

The echo of that thunderclap is still sounding in my heart. That was forty-five years ago! There are a thousand things I don’t remember about those days in seminary, but that afternoon remains unforgettable. And all he said was, “John, I love Jesus Christ.”

James Morgan died a year later of stomach cancer, leaving a wife and four small children. His chief legacy in my life was one statement on an afternoon in Pasadena. “I love Jesus Christ.”

Loving Jesus is natural and necessary for the children of God. It’s natural because it’s part of our nature as children of God. “If God were

your Father, you would *love* me, for I came from God" (John 8:42). The children of God have the natural disposition to love his Son.

Loving Jesus is also necessary because Paul says that if you don't love Jesus, you will be cursed: "If anyone has no *love* for the Lord, let him be accursed" (1 Corinthians 16:22). Loving Jesus is an essential (not optional) mark of being a beneficiary of God's grace. "Grace be with all who *love* our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (Ephesians 6:24). If you hold fast to the love of anything above Jesus, you are not his disciple: "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" (Matthew 10:37).

Sometimes people reduce the meaning of love for Jesus to obedience. They quote John 14:15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." But that verse does *not* say keeping Jesus' commandments *is* love. It says that keeping his commandments *results* from love. "If you love me [that is the root], you will keep my commandments [that is the fruit]." And the root and the fruit are not the same. Love is something invisible and inside. It is the root that produces the visible fruit of loving others.

So I join James Morgan in saying, "I love Jesus Christ."

And as I say it, I want to make clear what I mean:

- I *admire* Jesus Christ more than any other human or angelic being.
- I *enjoy* his ways and his words more than I enjoy the ways and words of anyone else.
- I *want his approval* more than I want the approval of anyone else.
- I *want to be with him* more than I want to be with anyone else.
- I *feel more grateful* to him for what he has done for me than I do to anyone else.
- I *trust* his words more fully than I trust what anyone else says.
- I am *more glad in his exaltation* than in the exaltation of anyone else, including me.

Would you pray with me that we would love Jesus Christ more than we ever have? And may our Lord Jesus grant that from time to time we would deliver quietly and naturally a thunderclap into the hearts of others with the simple words, “I love Jesus Christ.”

“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 Peter 1:8).

7

EVERY STEP ON THE CALVARY ROAD WAS LOVE

*The Intensity of Christ's Love and the
Intentionality of His Death*

The love of Christ for us in his dying was as conscious as his suffering was intentional. “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). If he was intentional in laying down his life, the intention was for us. It was love to us. “When Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Every step on the Calvary road meant, “I love you.”

Therefore, to feel the love of Christ in the laying down of his life, it helps to see how utterly intentional it was. Consider these five ways of seeing Christ’s intentionality in dying for us.

First, look at what Jesus said just after that violent moment when Peter tried to cleave the skull of the servant but only cut off his ear.

Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (Matthew 26:52–54).

It is one thing to say that the details of Jesus’ death were predicted in

the Old Testament. But it is much more to say that Jesus, in that night, himself was making his choices precisely to fulfill those Scriptures.

That is what Jesus said he was doing in Matthew 26:54. In effect he said, “I could escape this misery, but how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? I am not choosing to take that way out because I know the Scriptures. I know what must take place. It is my choice to fulfill all that is predicted of me in the Word of God.”

A second way the intentionality of his love for us is seen is in the repeated expressions of his intention to go to Jerusalem, into the very jaws of the lion.

Speaking to the Twelve as they traveled, Jesus said, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise” (Mark 10:33–34).

Jesus had a clear and all-controlling goal: to die according to the Scriptures. He knew when the time was near and set his face like flint: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51).

A third way we see the intentionality of Jesus to suffer for us is in the words he spoke through the mouth of Isaiah the prophet: “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting” (Isaiah 50:6).

I have to work hard in my imagination to keep before me what iron will this required. Humans recoil from suffering. We recoil a hundred times more from suffering that is caused by unjust, ugly, sniveling, low-down, arrogant people. At every moment of pain and indignity, Jesus chose not to do what would have been immediately just. He gave his back to the flogger. He gave his cheek to slapping. He gave his beard to plucking. He offered his face to spitting. And he was doing it for the very ones causing the pain. He was doing it intentionally for us.

A fourth way we see the intentionality of Jesus' suffering is in the way Peter explained how this was possible. He said, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

The way Jesus handled the injustice of it all was not by saying injustice doesn't matter, but by entrusting his cause to "him who judges justly." God would see that justice is done. That was not Jesus' calling at Calvary. Nor is it our highest calling now. "'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

The fifth and perhaps the clearest statement that Jesus makes about his own intentionality to die is in John:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:17–18)

Jesus' point in these words is that he is acting completely voluntarily. He is under no constraint from any mere human. Circumstances have not overtaken him. He is not being swept along in the injustice of the moment. He is in control.

Therefore, when John says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16), we should feel the intensity of his love for us to the degree that we see his intentionality to suffer and die. I pray that you will feel it profoundly. And may that profound experience of being loved by Christ have this effect on all of us: "The love of Christ controls us,...he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

8

BE CAREFUL, LEST THE LIGHT IN YOU BE DARKNESS

Pondering a Puzzling Text

No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.

—LUKE 11:33–36

Just before these verses, Jesus said, “Something greater than Solomon is here.... Something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:31–32). That is, the wisdom of Jesus exceeds the greatest human wisdom, and the resurrection of Jesus will be greater than the most spectacular human rescues and resuscitations.

Do we see this for what it is—magnificent and compelling—so it becomes the light and joy of our lives?

In the text above, Jesus talks about seeing, and he talks about two

lamps. He said this about the first lamp: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light” (v. 33).

I take this to refer to what Jesus had just said about his wisdom and resurrection. He set a lamp in the world—his wise and powerful presence—greater than Solomon and greater than Jonah. “I am the light of the world,” he said (John 8:12; 9:5). His greatness is the lamp that must not be hidden or missed.

He said this about the second lamp: “Your eye is the lamp of your body” (Luke 11:34).

I take this to mean that the way the lamp of Jesus becomes a lamp for you is that you see it for what it really is. Your eye becomes the lamp of your body when you see the lamp of his greatness in the world.

Then Jesus elaborated, “When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness” (v. 34). In other words, if your eye sees me for who I really am, then you are full of light; but if you don’t see me for who I am, then you are full of darkness.

Then Jesus said, “Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness” (v. 35). In other words, there is much that passes for light through the eye that is not light. There are many bright things in the world that keep us from seeing the true light of Christ, just like city lights keep you from seeing the stars.

“Be careful!” he said. This is the only imperative in the text. Be careful what you see! Be careful what you regard as bright and attractive and compelling. If it is not Christ, you will be filled with darkness, no matter how bright it seems for a season. Candles seem bright until the sun comes out. Then they are useless and are put away.

Christ is the glory we were made to see. His light alone will fill us and give the light of life and meaning to every part of our lives. And when that happens, we ourselves will shine and give off the rays of

Christ. "If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light" (v. 36).

Lord, open the eyes of our hearts to see the supreme greatness of your wisdom and power. Make our eyes good. Heal our blindness. Fill us with the all-pervading, all-exposing, all-purifying, all-pleasing light of your presence.

9

COVERING THE CHASM

*The Rebellion of Nudity and the
Meaning of Clothing*

The first consequence of Adam's and Eve's sin was that "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin cloths" (Genesis 3:7).

Suddenly they were self-conscious about their bodies. Before their rebellion against God, there was no shame. "The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). Now there is shame. Why?

There is no reason to think it's because they suddenly became ugly. Their beauty wasn't the focus in Genesis 2:25, and their ugliness is not the focus in Genesis 3:7. Why then the shame? Because the foundation of covenant-keeping love collapsed. And with it the sweet, all-trusting security of marriage disappeared forever.

The foundation of covenant-keeping love between a man and a woman is the unbroken covenant between them and God—God governing them for their good, and they enjoying him in that security and relying on him. When they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that covenant was broken and the foundation of their own covenant keeping collapsed.

They experienced this immediately in the corruption of their own covenant love for each other. It happened in two ways. Both relate to the experience of shame. In the first case, the spouse viewing my nakedness

is no longer trustworthy, so I am afraid I will be shamed. In the second, I myself am no longer at peace with God, but I feel guilty and defiled and unworthy. I deserve to be shamed.

In the first case, I am self-conscious of my body, and I feel vulnerable to shame because I know Eve has chosen to be independent from God. She has made herself central in the place of God. She is essentially now a selfish person. From this day forward, she will put herself first.

She is no longer a servant. So she is not safe. And I feel vulnerable around her because she is very likely to put me down for her own sake. So suddenly my nakedness is precarious. I don't trust her anymore to love me with pure covenant-keeping love. That's one source of my fear and shame.

The other source is that Adam himself, not just his spouse, has broken covenant with God. If she is rebellious and selfish, and is therefore unsafe, so am I. But the way I experience it in myself is that I feel defiled and guilty and unworthy. That's, in fact, what I am. Before the Fall, what was and what ought to have been were the same. But now, what is and what ought to be are not the same.

I ought to be humbly and gladly submissive to God. But I am not. This huge gap between what I am and what I ought to be colors everything about me, including how I feel about my body. So my wife might be the safest person in the world, but now my own sense of guilt and unworthiness makes me feel vulnerable. The simple, open nakedness of innocence now feels inconsistent with the guilty person that I am. I feel ashamed.

So the shame of nakedness arises from two sources, and both of them are owing to the collapse of the foundation of covenant love in our relationship with God. One is that Eve is no longer reliable to cherish me; she has become selfish and I feel vulnerable that she will put me down for her own selfish ends. The other is that I already know that I am guilty myself, and the nakedness of innocence contradicts my unworthiness. I am ashamed of it.

Scripture says that they tried to cope with this new situation by making clothing: “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Genesis 3:7). Adam’s and Eve’s effort to clothe themselves was a sinful effort to conceal what had really happened. They tried to hide from God (Genesis 3:8). Their nakedness felt too revealing and too vulnerable. So they tried to close the gap between what they were and what they ought to be by covering what is, and presenting themselves in a new way.

So what does it mean that God clothed them with animal skins? Was he confirming their hypocrisy? Was he aiding and abetting their pretense? If they were naked and shame-free before the Fall, and if they put on clothes to minimize their shame after the Fall, then what was God doing by clothing them even better than they could clothe themselves? I think the answer is that he was giving a negative message and a positive message.

Negatively, he was saying, You are not what you were and you are not what you ought to be. The chasm between what you are and what you ought to be is huge. Covering yourself with clothing is a right response to this—not to conceal it, but to confess it. Henceforth, you shall wear clothing, not to conceal that you are not what you should be, but to confess that you are not what you should be.

One practical implication of this is that public nudity today is not a return to innocence but a rebellion against moral reality. God ordains clothes to witness to the glory we have lost, and it is added rebellion to throw them off.

And for those who rebel in the other direction and make clothes themselves a means of power and prestige and attention-getting, God’s answer is not a return to nudity but a return to simplicity (1 Timothy 2:9–10; 1 Peter 3:4–5). Clothes are not meant to make people think about what is under them. Clothes are meant to direct attention to what is not under them: merciful hands that serve others in the name of Christ, beautiful feet that carry the gospel where it is needed, and a bright face that has beheld the glory of Jesus.

Now we have already crossed over to the more positive meaning of clothing that God had in his mind when he clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins. That was not only a witness to the glory we lost and a confession that we are not what we should be, but it is also a testimony that God himself would one day make us what we should be. God rejected their own self-clothing. Then he did it himself. He showed mercy with superior clothing.

Together with the other hopeful signs in the context (like the defeat of the serpent in Genesis 3:15), God's mercy points to the day when he will solve the problem of our shame decisively and permanently. He will do it with the blood of his own Son (as there apparently was bloodshed in the killing of the animals of the skins). And he will do it with the clothing of righteousness and the radiance of his glory (Galatians 3:27; Philippians 3:9, 21).

Which means that our clothes are a witness both to our past and present failure *and* to our future glory. They testify to the chasm between what we are and what we should be. And they testify to God's merciful intention to bridge that chasm through Jesus Christ and his death for our sins.

10

DISCERNING IDOLATRY IN DESIRE

Twelve Ways to Recognize the Rise of Covetousness

Most of us realize that enjoying anything other than God, from the best gift to the basest pleasure, can become idolatry. Paul said that covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Covetousness means “desiring something other than God in the wrong way.” But what does “in the wrong way” mean?

The reason this matters is both vertical and horizontal. Idolatry will destroy our relationship with God. And it will also destroy our relationships with people.

All human relational problems—from marriage and family to friendship to neighbors to classmates to colleagues—are rooted in various forms of idolatry, that is, wanting things other than God in wrong ways.

So here is my effort to think biblically about what those wrong ways are. What makes an enjoyment idolatrous? What turns a desire into covetousness, which is idolatry?

1. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is forbidden by God.* For example, adultery and fornication and stealing and lying are forbidden by God. Some people, at times, feel that these are pleasurable, or else they would not do them. No one sins out of duty. But such pleasure is a sign of idolatry.
2. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is disproportionate to the worth of what is desired.* Great desire for nongreat things is a sign that we are beginning to make those things idols.

3. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not permeated with gratitude.* When our enjoyment of something tends to make us not think of God, it is moving toward idolatry. But if the enjoyment gives rise to the feeling of gratefulness to God, we are being protected from idolatry. The grateful feeling that we don't deserve this gift or this enjoyment, but have it freely from God's grace, is evidence that idolatry is being checked.
4. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not see in God's gift that God himself is to be desired more than the gift.* If the gift is not awakening a sense that God, the Giver, is better than the gift, it is becoming an idol.
5. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is starting to feel like a right, and our delight is becoming a demand.* It may be that the delight is right. It may be that another person ought to give you this delight. It may be right to tell them this. But when all this rises to the level of angry demands or self-pitying resentment, idolatry is rising.
6. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it draws us away from our duties.* When we find ourselves spending time pursuing an enjoyment, knowing that other things or people should be getting our attention, we are moving into idolatry.
7. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it awakens a sense of pride that we can experience this delight while others can't.* This is especially true of delights in religious things, like prayer and Bible reading and ministry. It is wonderful to enjoy holy things. It is idolatrous to feel proud that we can.
8. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is oblivious or callous to the needs and desires of others.* Holy enjoyment is aware of others' needs and may temporarily leave a good pleasure to help another person have it. One might leave private prayer to be the answer to someone else's.

9. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not desire that Christ be magnified as supremely desirable through the enjoyment.* Enjoying anything but Christ (like his good gifts) runs the inevitable risk of magnifying the gift over the Giver. One evidence that idolatry is not happening is the earnest desire that this not happen.
 10. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not working a deeper capacity for holy delight.* We are sinners still. It is idolatrous to be content with sin. So we desire transformation. Some enjoyments shrink our capacities of holy joy. Others enlarge them. Some go either way, depending on how we think about them. When we don't care if an enjoyment is making us more holy, we are moving into idolatry.
 11. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when its loss ruins our trust in the goodness of God.* There can be sorrow at loss without being idolatrous. But when the sorrow threatens our confidence in God, it signals that the thing lost was becoming an idol.
 12. *Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when its loss paralyzes us emotionally so that we can't relate lovingly to other people.* This is the horizontal effect of losing confidence in God. Again, great sorrow is no sure sign of idolatry. Jesus had great sorrow. But when desire is denied, and the effect is the emotional inability to do what God calls us to do, the warning lights of idolatry are flashing.
- For myself and for you, I pray the admonition of John: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

11

THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF BABY TALK

*Human Language as the
Path to Knowing God*

Human language is precious. It sets us apart from animals. It makes our most sophisticated scientific discoveries and our deepest emotions sharable. Above all, God chose to reveal himself to us through human language in the Bible.

At the fullness of time, he spoke to us by a Son (Hebrews 1:1–2). That Son spoke human language, and he sent his Spirit to lead his apostles into all truth so they could tell the story of the Son in human language. Without this story in human language, we would not know the Son. Therefore, human language is immeasurably precious.

But it is also imperfect for capturing the fullness of God. In 1 Corinthians 13, there are four comparisons between this present time and the age to come after Christ returns.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mir-

ror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
(1 Corinthians 13:8–13)

Note the comparisons with this age (now) and the age to come (then):

Now: We know in part.

Then: When the perfect comes, the partial will pass away (vv. 9–10).

Now: I spoke and thought and reasoned like a child.

Then: When I became a man, I gave up childish ways (v. 11).

Now: We see in a mirror dimly.

Then: We will see face to face (v. 12).

Now: I know in part.

Then: I will know fully, even as I am fully known (v. 12).

In this context, we can see what Paul meant by saying, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.” He was saying that in this age, our human language and thought and reasoning are like baby talk compared to how we will speak and think and reason in the age to come.

When Paul was caught up into heaven and given glimpses of heavenly realities, he said he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12:4). Our language is insufficient to carry the greatness of all that God is.

But what a blunder it would be to infer from this that we may despise language or treat it with contempt or carelessness. What a blunder, if we began to belittle true statements about God as cheap or unhelpful or false.

What folly it would be if we scorned prepositions and clauses and phrases and words, as though they were not inexpressibly precious and essential to life.

The main reason this would be folly is that God has chosen to send his Son into our nursery and speak baby talk with us. Jesus Christ became a child with us. There was a time when Jesus himself would have said, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child and thought like a child and reasoned like a child.” That is what happened in the Incarnation. He accommodated himself to our baby talk. He stammered with us in the nursery of human life in this age.

Jesus spoke baby talk. The Sermon on the Mount is our baby talk. His high priestly prayer in John 17 is baby talk. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) is baby talk. He spoke infinitely precious, true, glorious baby talk.

More than that, God inspired an entire Bible of baby talk. True baby talk. Infallible baby talk. Baby talk with absolute authority and power. Baby talk that is sweeter than honey and more to be desired than gold (see Psalm 19:10). John Calvin said that “God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children.”* Oh, how precious is the baby talk of God. It is not like grass that withers or flowers that fade. It stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

There will be another language and thought and reasoning in the age to come. And we will see things that could not have been expressed in our present baby talk. But when God sent his Son into our human nursery, talking baby talk and dying for the toddlers, he shut the mouths of those who ridicule the possibilities of truth and beauty in the mouth of babes.

And when God inspired a book with baby talk as the infallible inter-

* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, originally published 1536, 1.13.1.

pretation of himself, what shall we say of the children who make light of the gift of human language as the medium of knowing God? Woe to those who despise or belittle or exploit or manipulate this gift to the children of man. It is not a toy in the nursery. It is the breath of life. "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63).

12

LET CHRISTIANS VOTE AS THOUGH NOT VOTING

*Political Engagement When the World
Is Passing Away*

Voting is like marrying and crying and laughing and buying. We should do it, but only as if we were not doing it. That's because "the present form of this world is passing away" and, in God's eyes, "the time has grown very short." Here's the way Paul put it:

The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29–31)

Let's take these points one at a time and compare them to voting.

1. *"Let those who have wives live as though they had none"* (v. 29). This doesn't mean move out of the house, don't have sex, and don't call

her “Honey.” Earlier in this chapter Paul said, “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights” (1 Corinthians 7:3). He also said to love her the way Christ loved the church, leading and providing and protecting (Ephesians 5:25–30). What it means is that marriage is momentary. It’s over at death, and there is no marriage in the resurrection. Wives and husbands are second priorities, not first. Christ is first. Marriage is for making much of him.

So that means if she is exquisitely desirable, beware of desiring her more than Christ. And if she is deeply disappointing, beware of being hurt too much. This is temporary—only a brief lifetime. Then comes the never-disappointing life that is life indeed.

So it is with voting. We should do it, but only as if we were not doing it. Its outcomes do not give us the greatest joy when they go our way, and they do not demoralize us when they don’t. Political life is for making much of Christ, whether the world falls apart or holds together.

2. “And those who mourn [do so] as though they were not mourning” (v. 30).

Christians mourn with real, deep, painful mourning, especially over losses—loss of those we love, loss of health, loss of a dream. These losses hurt. We cry when we are hurt. But we cry as though not crying. We mourn knowing we have not lost something so valuable we cannot rejoice in our mourning. Our losses do not incapacitate us. They do not blind us to the possibility of a fruitful future serving Christ. The Lord gives and takes away, but he remains blessed (Job 1:21). And we remain hopeful in our mourning.

So it is with voting. There are losses. We mourn. But not as those who have no hope. We vote and we lose, or we vote and we win. In either case, we win or lose as if we were not winning or losing. Our expectations and frustrations are modest. The best this world can offer is short and small. The worst it can offer has been predicted in the book of Revelation. And

no vote will hold it back. In the short run, Christians lose (Revelation 13:7). In the long run, we win (Revelation 21:4).

3. *"And those who rejoice [do so] as though they were not rejoicing"* (v. 30).

Christians rejoice in health (James 5:13) and in sickness (James 1:2). There are a thousand good things that come down from God that call forth the feeling of happiness. Beautiful weather. Good friends who want to spend time with us. Delicious food and someone to share it with. A successful plan. A person helped by our efforts.

But none of these good and beautiful things can satisfy our soul. Even the best cannot replace what we were made for, namely, the full experience of the risen Christ (John 17:24). Even fellowship with him here is not the final and best gift. There is more of him to have after we die (Philippians 1:21–23), and even more after the resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:1–5). The best experiences here are foretastes. The best sights of glory are through a mirror dimly. The joy that rises from these previews does not and should not rise to the level of the hope of glory. These pleasures will one day be as though they were not.

So we rejoice remembering this joy is a foretaste and will be replaced by a vastly better joy. Not less. And not less material. But better in the radically renewed material universe. God created matter and will not simply throw it away. He will not turn the whole universe into a spirit. But in that new material universe with a resurrected, material body, which Paul nevertheless called a “spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44), our joy will be vastly superior to all we have known here.

So it is with voting. There are joys. The very act of voting is a joyful statement that we are not under a tyrant. And there may be happy victories. But the best government we get is a foreshadowing. Peace and justice are approximated now. They will be perfect when Christ comes. So our joy is modest. Our triumphs are short lived—and shot through with imperfection. So we vote as though not voting.

4. "And those who buy [do so] as though they had no goods" (v. 30).

Let Christians keep on buying while this age lasts. Christianity is not withdrawal from business. We are involved but as though not involved. Business simply does not have the weight in our hearts that it has for many. All our getting and all our having in this world are getting and having things that are not ultimately important. Our car, our house, our books, our computers, our heirlooms—we possess them with a loose grip. If they are taken away, we say that, in a sense, we did not have them. We are not here to possess. We are here to lay up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–20).

This world matters, but it is not ultimate. It is the stage for living in such a way as to show that this world is not our God but that Christ is our God. It is the stage for using the world to show that Christ is more precious than the world.

So it is with voting. We do not withdraw. We are involved, but as if not involved. Politics does not have ultimate weight for us. It is one more stage for acting out the truth that Christ, and not politics, is supreme.

5. "And those who deal with the world [do so] as though they had no dealings with it" (v. 31).

Christians should deal with the world. This world is here to be used. Dealt with. There is no avoiding it. Not to deal with it is to deal with it that way. Not to weed your garden is to cultivate a weedy garden. Not to wear a coat in Minnesota is to freeze, to deal with the cold that way. Not to stop when the light is red is to spend your money on fines or hospital bills or lawsuits or a funeral and deal with the world that way. We must deal with the world.

But as we deal with it, we don't give it our fullest attention. We don't ascribe to the world the greatest status. There are unseen things that are vastly more precious than the world. We use the world without offering it our whole soul. We may work with all our might when dealing with the world, but the full passions of our heart will be attached to something

higher—Godward purposes. We use the world but not as an end in itself. It is a means. We deal with the world as a gratefully received gift *from* Christ and in order to make much *of* Christ.

So it is with voting. We deal with the system. We deal with the news. We deal with the candidates. We deal with the issues. But we deal with it all as if not dealing with it. It does not have our fullest attention. It is not the great thing in our lives. Christ is. And Christ will be ruling over his people with perfect supremacy, no matter who is elected and no matter what government stands or falls. So we vote as though not voting.

By all means vote. But remember, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17).