

THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN HIS SON

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

M A T T H E W 17:5

ENTERING THE JOY OF GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

Imagine being able to enjoy what is most enjoyable with unbounded energy and passion forever. This is not now our experience. Three things stand in the way of our complete satisfaction in this world. One is that

3. John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1998, 158 ¶72). This book is an extended meditation on Jonathan Edwards's great work, *The End for Which God Created the World*. The truth that God is infinitely happy in the fellowship of the Trinity is shown there to be the ground of our ever-increasing happiness, as God grants us the unspeakable privilege of enjoying God with the very joy of God.

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

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

LOVED FOR SHINING LIKE THE SUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOVED FOR SERVING LIKE A DOVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOVED AS HAPPY CO-CREATOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INFINITE INTIMACY

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

Their intimacy and communion are incomparable. “No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son” (Matthew 11:27). “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is *in the bosom of the Father*, he has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus spoke with such unprecedented endearment and intimacy concerning the Father that his enemies sought to kill him “because...he called God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). The Father’s intimacy with the Son was such that he opened all his heart to him. “The Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing” (John 5:20). He withholds no blessing from the Son but pours

out his Spirit on him without measure. “He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is *not by measure* that he gives the Spirit; the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:34–35). And as the Son carries out the redeeming plan of the Father, the Father’s heart abounds with increasingly intense expressions of love for the Son. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life” (John 10:17). This overflowing esteem that the Father has for his only Son spills over onto all who serve the Son: “If anyone serves me,” Jesus says, “the Father will honor him” (John 12:26). Thus the Father seeks every means possible to manifest his infinite delight in the Son of his love—including the converse: “How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God!” (Hebrews 10:29).

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

UNIMAGINABLE FERVENCY

It is impossible to overstate the greatness of the fatherly affection God has for his one and only Son. We see this unbounded affection behind the logic of Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare *his own Son*, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?” The point of this unspeakably precious verse is that if God was willing

to do the hardest thing for us (give up his cherished Son to misery and death), then surely that which looks hard (giving Christians all the blessings that heaven can hold) will not be too hard for God. What makes this verse work is the immensity of the Father's affection for the Son. Paul's assumption is that "not sparing his own Son" was the hardest thing imaginable for God to do.⁶ Jesus is, as Paul put it simply in Colossians 1:13, "the Son of his love."

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

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

THE FULLNESS OF DEITY DWELLS IN A BODY

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

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

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

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

ferent forms of this kind of teaching called adoptionism.⁹

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

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

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

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

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

BEGOTTEN NOT MADE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

15. *Ibid.*, 358.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOD'S DELIGHT IN BEING GOD

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

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

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

Edwards then carries the analogy over to God and says,

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

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

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

that he is he sees reflected fully and perfectly in the countenance of his Son. And in this he rejoices with infinite joy.

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

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

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

This is not irrelevant speculation. It is the foundation of all Christian hope. This will become increasingly obvious especially in chapter 6, but let me point the way here. In this God-centered, divine righteousness lies the

23. I have tried elsewhere to show that this is not merely, or even mainly, a logical deduction but a clearly revealed truth of Scripture. See *Desiring God*, appendix 1, (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1996), 255–266.

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

BOUNDLESS JOY VS. BROKEN CISTERNS

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

Let us then stand in awe of this great God! And let us turn from all the trivial resentments and fleeting pleasures and petty pursuits of materialism and merely human “spirituality.” And let us be caught up into the gladness that God has in the glory of his Son, who is the radiance and

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

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

image of his Father. There is coming a day when the very pleasure that the Father has in the Son will be in us and will be our own pleasure. May God's enjoyment of God—unbounded and everlasting—flow into us even now by the Holy Spirit! This is our glory and our joy.

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

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this
 be shocked, be utterly desolate,”
 says the LORD,
 “for my people have committed two evils:
 they have forsaken me,
 the fountain of living waters,
 and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
 broken cisterns,
 that can hold no water.”
 (Jeremiah 2:12–13)

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

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

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

THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN ALL HE DOES

*Whatever the LORD pleases, he does,
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all deeps.*

P S A L M 1 3 5 : 6

MY HEART'S DESIRE

The basic goal of my life and the reason for writing this book is to direct the attention of more and more people to the pleasures of God revealed in Scripture; that we might see in the pleasures of God some of the infinite measure of his worth and excellency; and, in seeing this glory, be transformed to the likeness of his Son; and give ourselves so passionately to the work of mercy and missions, that all the nations will see and give glory to our Father in heaven.

When I preached on the pleasures of God back in 1987, I jotted down in my notes one Sunday this summary aim and prayer:

Portray his pleasures in preaching.
Behold his glory in listening.
Approach his likeness in meditation.
Display his worth in the world.

Whether in preaching or in writing, this is my heart's desire. I long for all God's people to be able to say, "My eyes are ever toward the LORD. . . . I keep the LORD always before me. . . . My heart says to You [the LORD], Your face, LORD, do I seek. Hide not your face from me" (Psalm 25:15; 16:8; 27:8–9). I long for them to seek God with the heartfelt yearning of Moses when he prayed, "Show me, I pray, your glory" (Exodus 33:18), and then to come forth from this encounter into a dark and desperate world with their faces shining because they have seen the majesty of God (Exodus 34:29).

In chapter 1 we focused on the pleasure that God the Father has in his Son. The most important lesson to be learned from that truth is this: God is and always has been an exuberantly happy God. From all eternity, even before there were any human beings to love, God has been overflowing with happiness in his love for the Son. He has never been lonely. He has always rejoiced, with overflowing satisfaction, in the glory and the partnership of his Son. The Son of God has always been the landscape of God's excellencies and the panorama of God's perfections, so that from all eternity God has beheld, with indescribable satisfaction, the magnificent terrain of his own radiance reflected in the Son.

A second lesson to learn from God's pleasure in the Son is that God is not constrained by any inner deficiency or unhappiness to do anything he does not want to do. If God were unhappy, if he were in some way deficient, then he might indeed be constrained from outside in some way to do what he does not want to do, in order to make up his deficiency and finally to be happy. This is what distinguishes us from God. We have an immense void inside that craves satisfaction from powers and persons and pleasures outside ourselves. Yearning and longing and desire are the very stuff of our nature. We are born deficient and needy and dissatisfied. We come into the world knowing almost nothing, and have to spend years and years going to classes or learning in the school of hard knocks, in order to fill up a little of this void of ignorance. Parents and teachers tell us to do things that we don't like to do because we need to do them to overcome some weakness in ourselves—to increase our knowledge or strengthen our bodies or refine our manners or sharpen our intellect.

But God is not like that. He has been complete and overflowing with satisfaction from all eternity. He needs no education. No one can offer anything to him that doesn't already come from him.

For who has known the mind of the Lord,
 or who has been his counselor?
 Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?
 For from him and through him and to him are all things.
 To him be glory for ever. Amen.
 (Romans 11:34–36)

So no one can bribe God or coerce him in any way. Whatever you or I or anyone or any circumstance offers to God, it is only the reflex of something he has already given or already done. The source of all things cannot be enriched or tempted with angelic or human service. “He is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). If anyone offers God anything—and aims to offer it rightly—he must say with David, “Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and we have given only what comes from you” (1 Chronicles 29:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:7). In other words, all that is, including the ability to offer willingly, is a gift from the overflowing, all-sufficient, ever-happy God.

WHAT BRAINERD TAUGHT THE INDIANS

The picture that comes to my mind when I think of this great truth is not the lecture hall or the debating chamber or even the place where I preach week in and week out. The picture that comes to my mind is a clearing in the woods of New Jersey. The year is 1745 near a village called Crossweeksung. David Brainerd, the twenty-seven-year-old missionary to the Indian people, coughs up blood every day because he is dying of tuberculosis. He will live barely two more years. He is preaching to 130 Indians whom God has called out of darkness by an amazing awakening under Brainerd's preaching. According to Brainerd's own testimony, his message this day concerns the all-sufficiency and everlasting happiness

of God. He tells us what he was burdened to teach these preliterate Indians in the wilderness:

It is necessary, in the first place, to teach them, that God is from everlasting, and so distinguished from all creatures; though it is very difficult to communicate anything of that nature to them, they having no terms in their language to signify an eternity *a parte ante* [that is, eternity past] The divine all-sufficiency must also necessarily be mentioned, in order to prevent their imagining that God was unhappy while alone, before the formation of his creatures.¹

By “alone” Brainerd does not mean that God had no fellowship with his Son in the Holy Spirit before creation. He only means that there were no creatures with whom to relate. Yet God was not unhappy, because in the fellowship of the Trinity he is all-sufficient. Brainerd believed with all his heart that this was good news. It was not to be kept from the simplest believers. It was a great part of God’s glory, and God’s glory was the heart of all true religious experience.²

When my mind returns from that scene in the woods of New Jersey, I am encouraged to press the truth more earnestly than ever. God does what he does, not begrudgingly or under external constraint as though he were boxed in or trapped by some unforeseen or unplanned situation. On the contrary, because he is complete and exuberantly happy and overflowing with satisfaction in the fellowship of the Trinity, all he does is free and uncoerced. His deeds are the overflow of his joy. This is what it means when the Scripture says that God acts according to the “good pleasure” of his will (Ephesians 1:5). It means that nothing outside God’s

1. *Second Appendix to Mr. Brainerd’s Journal*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 426.

2. He wrote in his journal four months before he died, “I saw with no less clearness that the essence of religion consisted in the soul’s conformity to God. . . and this from a clear view of his infinite excellency and worthiness in himself, to be loved, adored, worshiped, and served by all intelligent creatures. Thus I saw that when a soul loves God with a supreme love, he therein acts like the blessed [happy] God himself, who most justly loves himself in that manner: So when God’s interest and his are become one, and he longs that God should be glorified, and rejoices to think that he is unchangeably possessed of the highest glory and blessedness [happiness], herein also he acts in conformity to God.” Jonathan Edwards, comp., Norman Pettit, ed., *The Life of David Brainerd*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 449.

own pleasure—the pleasure he has in himself—has constrained his choices and his deeds.

ALL THAT THE LORD PLEASES

This brings us to the focus of the present chapter, “The Pleasure of God in All He Does.” If God is not under constraint by forces outside himself to act contrary to his good pleasure, but rather acts only out of the overflow of the joy of his boundless self-sufficiency, then all his acts are the expression of joy and he has pleasure in all that he does. We begin our biblical reflections at Psalm 135. It starts by calling us to praise the Lord: “Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD, give praise, O servants of the LORD.” Then, in verse 3 the psalmist begins giving us reasons why we should feel praise rising in our hearts toward God. He says, for example, that the Lord is “good and gracious” (verse 3), and that he has “chosen Jacob for himself” (verse 4), and that he is great above all gods (verse 5). Then in verse 6 this list of reasons for praise climaxes with the great affirmation,

*All that the LORD pleases, he does,
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all deeps.*

Similarly in Psalm 115 (vv. 1–3) this note is sounded with clarity and force. It begins by calling for God to glorify himself and reaches up to declare his sovereign freedom in the heavens:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us,
but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love
and your faithfulness!
Why should the nations say,
“Where is their God?”
Our God is in the heavens;
All that he pleases, he does.

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

Another witness to this truth is the prophet Isaiah. God speaks through him and says,

I am God and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, "My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my pleasure."
(Isaiah 46:9–10)

The word translated "pleasure" (*hēphetz*) is the noun form of the verb "he pleases" (*haphētz*) in Psalm 135:6 and 115:3. It is the word used in Psalm 1:2 ("His *delight* is in the law of the LORD"), and Psalm 16:3 ("They are the noble in whom is all my *delight*"), and Isaiah 62:4 ("You shall be called My *delight* is in her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you and your land shall be married").

SOVEREIGN FREEDOM

The point is that God acts in sovereign freedom. His acts do not spring from the need to make up deficiencies but from the passion to express the abundance of his delight. This is the meaning of his freedom. I have called it *sovereign* freedom because this is the note struck in all three texts we have looked at—God does in fact do all his pleasure. He is free in that he has no deficiencies that make him dependent, and he is sovereign in that he can act on his delights without being stopped by powers outside himself. "All that he pleases, he does." Thus his freedom is a sovereign freedom.

What God the Father beholds as he looks out across the panorama of his own perfections in the Person of his Son is an all-satisfying scene of infinite wisdom, love, and power. Thus his happiness flows from his perfections, including the perfection of his infinite power. It is this immeasurable power that guarantees the freedom of God's delight in all that he does. His delight is the joy that he has in the reflection of his own glory in the person of his Son. But part of that glory is infinite power. And the unique function of his power is to make way for the overflow of his joy in the work of creation and redemption. It is his power that removes (in God's time and God's way) any obstacles to the accomplishment of his good pleasure. Thus the declaration that God does all that he pleases is a declaration of his power. This is what we mean by sovereignty—God's power always makes way for his perfections to be expressed according to his good pleasure.

I love the image that C. S. Lewis gives of God's sovereign freedom in creation. It shows how the good pleasure of his heart to create and save is the happy overflow of his all-sufficiency. Lewis says,

To be sovereign of the universe is no great matter to God.... We must keep always before our eyes that vision of Lady Julian's in which God carried in His hand a little object like a nut, and that nut was "all that is made." God who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them.³

IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF

This connection between power and pleasure is behind 1 Timothy 6:15–16, where the apostle Paul calls God, "the *blessed* and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality." We saw in chapter 1 (note 2) that "blessed" (*makarios*) means "happy" (1 Timothy 1:11). Thus Paul is speaking of the "happy and only Sovereign." Notice what is stressed in calling God "blessed" or "happy." God's sole and unique power over all other powers is stressed. First, he is

3. Quoted from Clyde Kilby, ed., *The Four Loves in A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 85.

called the “only Sovereign”—not just the Sovereign, but the *only* Sovereign. In other words, he has no serious competitors for his power. He is the *only* “powerful one.”

Then Paul says that this happy God is “King of kings.” Again the point is that he is over all other royal authorities that might seem to challenge his power and his freedom to act as he pleases. Then Paul says that he is “Lord of lords.” If there are any gods or lords (and there are!), Paul emphasizes that there is none that can successfully overthrow the power and freedom of the Lord of lords (1 Corinthians 8:5–6). Finally Paul says that “he alone has immortality.” God is in a class by himself. All other beings depend upon his creative power for existence and life (Acts 17:25). He depends upon no one.

All of this teaches that the happiness of God is rooted in his utterly unique power and authority in the universe. He is the “*only* Sovereign,” and therefore he is the *happy* Sovereign, because there is none that can frustrate what he aims to do according to his good pleasure. C. S. Lewis put it like this: “The freedom of God consists in the fact that no cause other than Himself produces His acts and no external obstacle impedes them—that His own goodness is the root from which they all grow and His own omnipotence the air in which they all flower.”⁴

IS GOD OUR MODEL RISK-TAKER?

In the summer of 1987 I attended a young leaders conference sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization called “Singapore ’87.” One of the speakers there sounded a note that shows the immense relevance of what I am saying here in this chapter. Among all the excellent things I heard at the conference, this note was, in my judgment, a misleading one. It was by no means the dominant note of the conference, for which I am glad, because I think the cause of world evangelization would suffer if it became a dominant note in the music of missionary preaching.

This particular speaker developed a vision of God as our model “risk-taker.” He portrayed God as taking great risks, and said that this is

4. Quoted from *The Problem of Pain*, in *Ibid.*, 80.

why we should be willing to take great risks for the cause of world evangelization. Now, make no mistake, I love to hear leaders call for radical, risk-taking allegiance to the global cause of the gospel. So I was emotionally primed to say amen to this speaker's conclusions. But when he was done I felt like the very foundations of Christian risk-taking had been weakened rather than strengthened—namely, the truth that “God is in heaven; he does all that he pleases.”

I failed to meet the speaker to talk with him personally, and so I wrote him a letter to express my concern. I think quoting my letter at length might be the most engaging way I could explain why I think the sovereignty and freedom of God to do all his pleasure is so important. I have made only slight changes to conceal identities and clarify at a few spots. The letter is dated July 6, 1987.

Dear [friend],

My main reason for writing is to offer a perspective on one of the brief talks that you made concerning God as our model risk-taker. I wanted to speak to you in person about this, because it sets forth a view of God that is so different than the one I have. It seemed to me from what others said in our small group, as well as over lunch, that your view of God as a risk-taker was not typical of what others were thinking.

I'm perfectly willing to admit that perhaps I am reading too much into the term “risk-taker” and that the differences that I perceive are simply a matter of semantics. But just in case that's not so, let me spell out my response...

It seems to me that the dimension of God's character which frees me to be a risk-taker for his glory is precisely the truth that God does not and cannot take any risks.⁵ In my own life the

5. In saying there is something God cannot do, I am not limiting his sovereignty, because all I am saying is that God cannot use his sovereignty to make himself unsovereign. We have all heard the question: Can God make a rock big enough so that he cannot lift it? If we say yes, then he can't lift the rock. If we say no, then he can't make the rock. Heads he loses, tails he loses. The problem with this question is that it is a word trick and not a weakening of God. C. S. Lewis described the trick like this:

You may attribute miracles to him but not nonsense. This is no limit to his power... You have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two words “God can.” It remains true that all *things* are possible

greatest obstacle to risk-taking is unbelief—unbelief in the promises and love and power and wisdom of God; or to put it another way, that God has the power, authority, wisdom, and willingness to make us “more than conquerors” through our injuries and loss. This is the confidence that frees me to take a risk for Christ.

But the God that you described as a risk-taker does not inspire that kind of confidence. To describe God as a risk-taker and gambler, as you did, suggests 1) that he cannot foresee what will come of his decisions; and 2) that he is not in control of things so as to make his counsel stand. But it seems to me that Scripture presents a very different portrait of God.

Let me take a few of the examples that you used to illustrate God as a risk-taker.

1. Did God take a risk in putting the Great Commission into our hands? I don't think so. He did not put it into our hands to such an extent that it is out of his own hands. John 10:16 says that Jesus must and will gather his sheep that are not yet in the fold! (“I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; *I must bring* them also, and they will heed my voice.”) He is the one who opens the hearts of men (Acts 16:14). He draws people to the Son, overcoming their resistance to his sovereign grace (John 6:44, 65). He calls his messengers, and they accomplish their mission only by his power (Romans 15:15–18; 1 Corinthians 15:10).

with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God. (From *The Problem of Pain*, in *A Mind Awake*, 79)

I could wish we were dealing here only with the word games of sophomore philosophy students just discovering such conundrums. But this is not the case. There are serious scholarly attempts being made today to argue that God's omnipotence and knowledge do in fact include the ability to make a human creature, for example, whose choices he *cannot* know in advance. In other words, it seems that God's knowledge is great enough to create something that exceeds his knowledge. Richard Rice, professor of theology at Loma Linda University, argues this way: “Can [God] create beings with a capacity to surprise and delight him, as well as disappoint him, as they choose, and not know in advance what all their choices will be? If he cannot, then there is something significant that God cannot do. And this means that his power is limited.” [From “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” in Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 137.] But the question we should ask Professor Rice is this: Is it a “significant thing” for an omniscient and omnipotent God to create a being whose choices are beyond his foreknowledge? Or is it a “nonentity” or “nonsense” as, I believe, Lewis would suggest? See the following footnote for more on this issue.

The Great Commission is not in question. “This gospel of the kingdom *will* be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations” (Psalm 22:27–28). The full number of the Gentiles shall come in (Romans 11:25). “The earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD” (Numbers 14:21). All of Scripture affirms the victory of God in world missions. It is not in question. God has promised. God is sovereign! Because he rules over the hearts of men and is the Lord of his church, his purpose cannot fail! Therefore, giving the Great Commission to the church was not a risk.

Perhaps before looking at the other points you made, I should try to define “risk.” I would define it this way: A person takes a risk when he performs an action that exposes him to the uncertain possibility of injury or loss. This means that if you know that an action will hurt you and you choose it anyway, you do not call it a risk. You may call it foolishness. You may call it sacrifice. Or you may call it love. But risk implies uncertainty: maybe I will lose, and maybe I won’t; I’m not sure.

The same thing is true of gambling. If you know the outcome of the dice when you roll them, it is not gambling. It is sure loss or sure gain. Uncertainty is at the heart of risk and gambling.

But God is not uncertain about anything!⁶ “I am God, and

6. We saw in footnote 5 that not all Christians believe this. In fact, there is renewed effort today, from within the household of faith, to refute the truth of God’s knowledge of all future events. Recently Clark Pinnock edited a book of essays entitled *A Case for Arminianism*, in which he and others defend God’s limited foreknowledge. Pinnock himself, after a pilgrimage from Calvinism to Arminianism (and beyond, since classical Arminianism still affirmed that God knows all future actions), now declares, “Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential—yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom.... God too faces possibilities in the future, and not only certainties. God too moves into a future not wholly known because not yet fixed” (25–26).

Pinnock was pressed to this position first by neo-Arminian logic, not Scripture. This is ironic because of how persistently he accuses others of silencing Scripture with “Calvinian logic” (19, 21, 22, 25, 26, 28). The neo-Arminian logic goes like this: “A total omniscience would necessarily mean that everything we will ever choose in the future will have been already spelled out in the divine knowledge register, and consequently the belief that we have truly significant choices to make would seem to be mistaken” (25). Thus the philosophical presuppositions that

foreknowledge is incompatible with “significant choices” and that the reality of what he calls “significant choices” is more sure than the total foreknowledge of God—these two neo-Arminian (not classical Arminian) presuppositions lead him logically to reject the total foreknowledge of God. Only then does he say, “Therefore, I had to ask myself if it was biblically possible to hold that... free choices would not be something that can be known even by God because they are not yet settled in reality” (25). In another place he says, “Let me explain five of the doctrinal moves that *logic required* and I believed *Scripture permitted* me to make...” (18–19, italics added). Scripture was searched as a confirmation of what neo-Arminian logic demanded.

On the surface, Pinnock’s basic argument against God’s foreknowledge of free human choices looks like C. S. Lewis’s argument against limiting God’s omnipotence by saying he can’t make a rock big enough so that he can’t lift it (see note 5). Lewis says that the idea of a being with total ability creating something *beyond* its ability is logical nonsense. It is saying yes and no about the same thing in the same way at the same time. This is no-thing. And to say God can’t do a no-thing is not to limit his ability at all. Pinnock attempts something similar with God’s foreknowledge. He says, “Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God.” In other words, they are a no-thing. And so to deny that God can know a no-thing is not to limit his knowledge at all. On the surface the arguments look similar. But they are not.

There is a profound difference. God’s omnipotence is preserved by Lewis because nonomnipotent omnipotence is a self-contradiction. This however is not the logical structure of Pinnock’s argument. He is not preserving the omniscience of God by rejecting nonomniscient omniscience, but by redefining omniscience so as to exclude knowledge of future human choices. Logic does not require this, and so it is not like Lewis’s argument. Rather, a philosophic presupposition requires it, namely, the presupposition that future choices have no knowable reality. They are a no-thing. The ground of this statement is not the law of non-contradiction—like saying (with Lewis) that a nonomnipotent omnipotence is a self-contradiction. Rather, the ground of Pinnock’s statement is an ontological or metaphysical judgment: future choices do not have a standing in reality that allows them to be the object of knowledge, not even God’s. It is not logic that demands this. It is a philosophic neo-Arminian system that demands it.

Pinnock calls this system, as he sketches it, “free-will theism.” He says it is a “doctrine of God that treads the middle way between classical theism, which exaggerates God’s transcendence of the world, and process theism, which presses for radical immanence” (26). One of the most puzzling things about Pinnock’s presentation of the system is his description of it as a creative and courageous new insight drawn out by a responsible interaction with our modern culture. He believes that this new shift away from classical theism began “because of a fresh and faithful reading of the Bible in dialogue with modern culture, which places emphasis on autonomy, temporality, and historical change” (15). He suggests that the developers of this neo-Arminian “free-will theism” are like Augustine in his generation: “If an Augustine had the courage to deal with the culture of his day and come up with some dazzling new insights, then we can do the same in our own setting” (29). “Just as Augustine came to terms with ancient Greek thinking, so we are making peace with the culture of modernity. Influenced by modern culture, we are experiencing reality as something dynamic and historical and are consequently seeing things in the Bible we never saw before” (27).

I say this is puzzling. If what we have here in this “free-will theism” are “dazzling new insights” under the influence of modern culture, why is it that I read the same thing in the Socinians of the seventeenth century? I read in an eighteenth-century Encyclopedia that, according to Socinius (1539–1604), “God’s omniscience is defined in such a way that it does not conflict with the contingency of events and the freedom of the will. God does not know in such a way that whatsoever he knows will surely come to pass. If God’s knowledge... were to make everything to happen necessarily, which does happen, then there would be no real sin, or guilt of sin.” Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopedia* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1988), 2209.

And if this system is owing to a biblically faithful, creative and courageous interaction with our modern culture, why do I turn to Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), the Puritan pastor and chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and find him treating virtually every modern argument against the omniscience of God which were all alive and well in his day three hundred years ago? I suspect that the reason for this is that there is nothing significantly new about Pinnock’s “free-will theism” but that this system is owing to the same impulses that are present in every generation to resist (however unwittingly!) the absolute Creator rights over his creature, and to make a place for human autonomy and self-determination through the limitation of God—either his power or his knowledge or both.

Charnock poses this utterly relevant question for Pinnock and his neo-Arminian colleagues, “But what if the foreknowledge of God, and the liberty of the will, cannot be fully reconciled by man? Shall we therefore deny a perfection in God to support a liberty in ourselves? Shall we rather fasten ignorance upon God, and accuse him of blindness, to maintain our liberty?”

(Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979], 450.) The new Arminians, against the wisdom even of their Arminian ancestors, have given a fatally wrong answer to this question.

If any reader has gotten this far in this note you are probably the kind of person who would like to see the evidences for God's foreknowledge laid out in the way Charnock gives them. Among the ninety-two pages on God's knowledge, there is a section with this thesis: "God knows all future contingencies, that is, God knows all things that shall accidentally happen, or, as we say, by chance; and *he knows all the free motions of men's wills that shall be to the end of the world*" (439, italics added). He lays out his compelling arguments biblically and logically in the following twenty-six pages.

For example, he shows that "the Scripture gives so large an account of contingents, predicted by God, no man can certainly prove that anything is unforeknown to him. It is as reasonable to think he knows every contingent, as that he knows some that lie as much hid from the eye of any creature, since there is no more difficulty to an infinite understanding to know all, than to know some" (442–443). God predicted in advance, by name and before they were born, that Cyrus would help rebuild Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28), and that Josiah would destroy Jeroboam's altar (1 Kings 13:2). "What," Charnock asks, "is more contingent, or is more the effect of the liberty of a man's will, than the names of their children?" (441). Yet God foreknew this human choice of Cyrus's and Josiah's parents, not to mention their own choices to do what God had predicted they would do.

God predicted Pharaoh's choice to honor the butler and hang the baker (Genesis 40:13, 19). He predicted the decisions of sinful men to pierce Jesus and not break a bone (Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10; John 19:36–37) and the decisions to divide his garments (Psalm 22:18; John 19:24). He foreknew the decision of the Egyptians to oppress Israel (Genesis 15:13); and the decision of Pharaoh to harden his heart (Exodus 3:19); and the decision of Isaiah's hearers to refuse to hear his message (Isaiah 6:9); and the decision of the Israelites to rebel after Moses' death (Deuteronomy 31:16); and the decision of Judas to betray Jesus (John 6:64).

He foreknew that the Amorites' voluntary sin would be "full" by the fourth generation, and he promised Abraham that only after this filling up of their sins will his posterity come and inhabit the land (Genesis 15:16). Charnock asks the barbed question, "If Abraham had been a Socinian [we could say, neo-Arminian], to deny God's knowledge of the free acts of men, had he not a fine excuse for unbelief? What would his reply have been to God? 'Alas, Lord, this is not a promise to be relied upon, the Amorites' iniquity depends upon the acts of their free will, and such thou canst have no knowledge of; thou canst see no more than a likelihood of their iniquity being full, and therefore there is but a likelihood of thy performing the promise, and not a certainty!' Would not this be judged not only a saucy, but a blasphemous answer?" (444). (For other texts describing God's foreknowledge of future voluntary acts see 1 Samuel 23:10–13; 2 Kings 13:19; Jeremiah 38:17–20; Ezekiel 3:6–7. See also Matthew 11:21 for God's knowledge of decisions that certainly would have happened under different circumstances.)

I would only add one more observation concerning Clark Pinnock's rejection of the orthodox doctrine of God's omniscience. I have found it typical on several fronts that as people move away from a long-cherished view of truth, they try to make their move look more attractive by caricaturing the older view in various unappealing ways. For example, Pinnock describes the God I am presenting in this book as "having to control everything like an oriental despot" (x), and "forcing [people] to enact the pre-programmed decrees" (20), and guiding history in a "coercive" way (21), and being "virtually incapable of responsiveness" (24). All this negative caricature is then put over against a God who works in terms remarkably amiable to the contemporary, modern mindset, for example, "giving salvation and eternal life *under the conditions of mutuality*" (xi, italics added). Pinnock attempts to give the impression that those who believe in the sovereign God of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and William Carey and J. I. Packer relate to him in a kind of philosophical way that is fatalistic and impersonal, while the new Arminians enjoy "a dynamic personal relationship between God, the world, and God's human creatures" (15).

In response to this I am tempted to ask if the vision of God that I have portrayed in *Desiring God* (1996) and *The Pleasures of God* is a lifeless, fatalistic, impersonal vision of the God I love and worship. But I would rather respond by letting A. W. Tozer speak for thousands of us who know the God of total omniscience and total omnipotence not as some lifeless philosophical idea, but as the all-satisfying Wonder and precious Father and Friend of our lives.

Omnipotence is not a name given to the sum of all power but an attribute of a personal God whom we Christians believe to be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and of all who believe on Him to life eternal. The worshiping man finds this knowledge a source of wonderful strength for his inner life. His faith rises to take the great leap upward into the fellowship of Him who can do whatever he wills to do, for whom nothing is hard or difficult because He possesses power absolute. A. W. Tozer: *An Anthology* (Camp Hill, Pa: Christian Publications, 1984), 94.

there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (Isaiah 46:9–10). God knows from ancient times what is yet to happen in the future. “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them” (Isaiah 42:9). God knows how all his plans will turn out. In what sense, then, can we speak of him taking risks, that is, acting with uncertainty about how things will turn out?

2. You said that God took a risk at the incarnation when he sent Jesus Christ into the world. You illustrated this with the possibility that Jesus could have been killed by Herod’s soldiers when he was yet a baby in Bethlehem.

But do you really believe that God had surrendered control of circumstances so that all the Old Testament promises of Christ’s crucifixion and teaching and resurrection could have come to nought? Was God’s word of promise, which came to fulfillment in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, really so uncertain?

What becomes of Acts 2:23—that Jesus was delivered up to be crucified (not with risk, but) “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”? How can the incarnation be called a risk when it was God’s precise intention and will (at least seven hundred years before it happened) to bruise his Son (Isaiah 53:10)? How can it be a risk for God to send his Son into the world when it was his plan that the Son be crucified (Acts 4:28)? It seems to me that we should not call the incarnation a risk, but rather a definite, planned sacrifice of the Son.

3. The same thing seems to be true of our individual conversion. Acts 13:48 says, “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” God does not leave even the issue of conversion finally in the hands of man—as though the makeup and size of the eternal worshiping community would be designed by the minds of sinful men and not by the infinite wisdom of God. The Lord knows those who are his (2 Timothy

2:19). He is the one who grants repentance (2 Timothy 2:25–26). He will call his own sheep by name and they will hear and come (John 10:3–4).

Nor does God leave to uncertain risk our growth and perseverance in holiness. Rather, he says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and will cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:27). It is the Lord himself who works in us to will and to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12–13; Hebrews 13:21). This is not mechanical or forced. But it is sure for God’s true people. Festo Kivengere, who served with African Enterprise, described the ineluctable, sovereign work of the Spirit in our lives like this:

He keeps struggling with our reluctancies and hesitations. He comes and convicts me over something, and I begin to fidget. We are real tough to handle, aren’t we? The gracious Holy Spirit does not push. He just does some gentle nudging.

When you fidget and become restless, He stops for awhile and lets you go on. Then He comes again and catches you in a corner where you won’t fidget so much. In the corner, He does His beautiful work of turning you around. And what do you see? The Lamb of God.

The cutting of the stone is done and you have been fitted in! That is how He is taking us, stones of all races and backgrounds, and fitting us together into a beautiful dwelling place of God.⁷

My conclusion from these reflections is that we should indeed take risks for the cause of Christ. In fact, before coming to Singapore I had gotten myself ready by preaching three sermons under the theme, “Risk and the Cause of God.” But the reason we

7. *Outlook*, xv, 1 (January 1978): 1.

humans can take risks is because we are ignorant of our *earthly* future. We are uncertain how things will turn out here. But God is in heaven and does whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3). His counsel always stands and his purposes are accomplished (Isaiah 46:9–10). He knows the end from the beginning, and therefore cannot take risks. He can sacrifice himself, and he can love. But he never rolls dice. Nothing that he does is ever a gamble.

For his own wise purposes, he can allow his cause to suffer temporary setbacks (both individually and globally). He can love at the price of his Son's life. But to describe him as a risk-taker calls into question his omniscience and sovereignty, and therefore takes away the very foundation of our confidence, and thus the power that enables us to take risks for God.

I thank you so much for taking the time to read this. Please know that it is written with the great hope that I have misunderstood your view of God. It comes with the great expectation that whatever remnants of disagreement may lie between us after this letter, will not hinder our allegiance to Jesus Christ and our willingness to lay down our lives for his honor.

Your friend and partner in the great Work,
John Piper

There is much in Scripture to show the vision of God's sovereign freedom to do all his pleasure. I have laid out many more texts in *Desiring God* (34–39). But I hope we have seen enough already in this chapter to know that we should bow before God and praise his sovereign freedom—that he always acts according to his own “good pleasure,” following the dictates of his own delights. He never becomes the victim of circumstance. He is never forced into a situation where he must do something in which he cannot rejoice.

Perhaps the glory of God's greatness in this regard will shine brighter if we see it in the confidence and courage it has given to thousands of risk-taking missionaries. Consider just one example, William Carey.⁸

8. For many more examples see Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971).

WILLIAM CAREY'S AWESOME GOD

William Carey is known as the father of modern missions. He gave forty years of his life in India from 1793 to 1834, and never went home on furlough. The vision of God that inflamed his heart for the nations was the free and sovereign God of warm-hearted, evangelical Calvinism—the God of George Whitefield the evangelist who had died when Carey was nine years old, and the God of Augustus Toplady (1740–1778), who wrote the hymn “Rock of Ages,” and the God of John Newton (1725–1807), author of “Amazing Grace.” Carey is often remembered for his strong opposition to the hyper-Calvinists of his day who were reputed to have told him to cool down in his enthusiasm for world missions because if God wanted to reach the heathen he would do it without Carey’s help.⁹

Carey did indeed oppose this unbiblical view of God’s sovereignty. But what is not as well known is that he opposed it not with an Arminian vision of God’s limited power, but with a biblically balanced vision of God’s free and sovereign grace. This is evident in the way he balanced the biblical teaching of God’s sovereign work in conversion with the responsibility we have for persuading people to exercise their wills to believe. He wrote,

We are sure that only those who are ordained to eternal life will believe [Acts 13:48], and that God alone can add to the church such as shall be saved [Acts 2:47]. Nevertheless we cannot but observe with admiration that Paul, the great champion for the glorious doctrines of free and sovereign grace, was the most conspicuous for his personal zeal in the work of persuading men to be reconciled to God.¹⁰

Carey did not believe that God could be frustrated in his designs for the world, but that “all the Lord pleases, he does.” This was the confidence

9. This was supposed to have been said by the elder John Ryland at the Northampton Association of Ministers. But his son, John Ryland Jr., disputed the story: “I never heard of it till I saw it in print, and cannot give credit to it at all.” Quoted in *Ibid.*, 280, note 14.

10. Quoted from his “Form of Agreement” written by him to guide the life of the Brethren of the Mission of Serampore. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 145.

that kept him going through incredible hardships for forty years. He shows us his view of God's freedom to act in his own good pleasure by answering one of the hardest questions that a missionary can be asked on the mission field. In 1797, four years after he came to India, Carey tells us of being confronted by a Brahman. Carey had preached on Acts 14:16 and 17:30 and said that God formerly allowed all men everywhere to go their own way, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent.

The Brahman responded, "Indeed I think God ought to repent for not sending the gospel sooner to us."

It is not an easy objection to answer. Carey's answer is awesome, like the God he loved and served:

To this I added, suppose a kingdom had been long overrun by the enemies of its true king, and he though possessed of sufficient power to conquer them, should yet suffer them to prevail, and establish themselves as much as they could desire, would not the valor and wisdom of that king be far more conspicuous in exterminating them, than it would have been if he had opposed them at first, and prevented their entering the country? Thus by the diffusion of gospel light, the wisdom, power, and grace of God will be more conspicuous in overcoming such deep-rooted idolatries, and in destroying all that darkness and vice which have so universally prevailed in this country, than they would have been if all had not been suffered to walk in their own ways for so many ages past.¹¹

What an answer! The free and sovereign God rules the nations in such a way that even the ages of unbelief will redound to his glory in the most pagan of countries when the gospel victory comes! Carey did not say that God's good pleasure was so frustrated by a stubborn and disobedient people whom he just couldn't sanctify enough to act the way they should. It is absolutely true that disobedience to the Great Commission violates God's word. And it is true that many generations of professing Christians will have to give an account for this sin.

11. Quoted in Tom Wells, *A Vision for Missions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 13.

But it does not follow (all Arminian logic notwithstanding) that God was handcuffed and unable to give his people a new heart of obedience (Ezekiel 11:19–20) or unable to cause them to walk in his statutes (Ezekiel 36:27). Whatever the cause of the church's disobedience to the Great Commission, Carey knew he could not lay it to the charge of God's impotence. This is why he answered the way he did. God has his wise and holy purposes in all that he does and he does all that he does according to his own good pleasure. Carey shared the vision of God I have tried to describe in these chapters. I learned much of it from him! God is in heaven and he is doing all his good pleasure, no matter how mysterious this may seem. This was the power behind the first era of modern missions.

THE VISION BEHIND *OPERATION WORLD*

And we should not think that the spirit of Carey is dead today. It is still driving large segments of the great missionary movement of our day to complete the Great Commission in this generation. One of the books that God is using around the world to mobilize the church in missionary passion and prayer is Patrick Johnstone's *Operation World*. It gives a status report on the circumstances relating to the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church in each country of the world. I cannot help but wonder whether its updated republication in 1987 was one of the crucial factors in God's plan to bring about such amazing changes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s.¹² What is the spirit and conviction behind this mountain-moving book? Patrick Johnstone expresses it with fervor:

Only the Lamb could open the seals. All the earth-shaking awesome forces unleashed on the world are released by the Lord Jesus Christ. He reigns today. He is in the control room of the universe. He is the only Ultimate Cause; all the sins of man and machinations of Satan ultimately have to enhance the glory and kingdom of our Saviour. This is true of our world today—in wars, famines, earthquakes, or the evil that apparently has the ascendancy. All

12. A more recent edition is available. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).

God's actions are just and loving. We have become too enemy-conscious, and can over-do the spiritual warfare aspect of intercession. We need to be more God-conscious, so that we can laugh the laugh of faith knowing that we have power over all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:19). He has already lost control because of Calvary where the Lamb was slain. What confidence and rest of heart this gives us as we face a world in turmoil and in such spiritual need.¹³

DOES GOD HAVE PLEASURE IN THE DEATH OF THE WICKED?

This is a glorious picture of God in his sovereign freedom—to do whatever he pleases and to accomplish all his pleasure. But it would be a fuzzy picture, a bit out of focus, if we stopped here. To bring it into focus and sharpen it, we have to ask this question: “How can God say in Ezekiel 18:23 and 32 that he does not have *pleasure* in the death of any impenitent person, if in fact he accomplishes all his *pleasure* and does whatever he *pleases*?”

In Ezekiel 18:30, God is warning the house of Israel of impending judgment: “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the LORD.” And he is urging them to repent: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions.” At the end of verse 31 he says, “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I do not have pleasure in the death of any one, says the LORD God; so turn, and live.”

This seems to be a very different picture than the one we saw in Psalm 135, where God does all that he pleases. This is the kind of text that causes people to jump to the conclusion (too quickly!) that William Carey had not read all of his Bible. Here God seems to be cornered. It seems that he is forced into judging them when he really doesn't want to. He seems to be about to do something that he is not pleased to do.¹⁴ Is he going to accomplish all his pleasure or not? Is God really free to do everything according to his good pleasure? Or does his sovereign freedom have its limits? Can he do whatever he pleases up to a point, and

13. Patrick Johnstone, *OperationWorld* (Kent, England: STL Books, 1987), 21.

14. Similarly there are texts that tell us God is kept back from doing things he has a desire to do (e.g. Matthew 23:37) as well as texts that express God's grief over things he has done (e.g. Genesis 6:7; 1 Samuel 15:11).

then after that is he forced into doing things he only grieves to do?

We might try to solve the problem by going back to Psalm 135 and saying that God does whatever he pleases in the *natural* sphere but not in the *personal* sphere. After all, it says in Psalm 135:7: “He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.” Might this not imply that God does all his pleasure in nature but not in the lives of persons?

This effort to limit God’s freedom to the sphere of nature will not work for two reasons.

One reason is that if God controls the wind and makes it blow whenever and wherever he pleases—which is certainly true (“He makes the wind to blow and the waters flow,” Psalm 147:18; and remember Jesus’ “Peace! Be still!”)—then God is somehow responsible for the destruction of thousands of lives by drowning because of the storms and hurricanes and tornadoes and monsoons and typhoons which God has “brought forth from his storehouses” over the centuries.

Do we charge God with wrong when we say this? Might it not be Satan who makes destructive wind blow? This is a good question. The answer is not simple. I don’t mean the answer is hard to find. I mean that the answer is complex. Satan does have great power in this world to do harm. (See note 16.) We know that he can cause sickness (Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38) and, since he is called a “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44), we may infer that he can indeed kill, whether by sickness or by stirring up people to kill or in other ways as well. It is hard not to see his hand in the tragic deaths, for example, of missionary children. I remember receiving a phone call that the son of a missionary friend was killed in a car accident. Another missionary family in Cameroon lost two of their three children in one day to malaria within days after coming home on furlough. And such stories are multiplied almost every day.

I hope no one will think that what I am saying here is written in some detached atmosphere, untouched by the pain and heartache of tragedy. I am not suggesting that such things are easy to bear or that they can be overcome with a few simple theological observations. For everything there is a season: “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to

keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:4, 7). In the moment of tragedy and world-shattering grief it is time to embrace and be silent. But the time for questions and answers will come. And when they come, it is a shortsighted compromise with the father of lies to say that Satan is stronger than God and that the hands of the Almighty were tied. This has never been the answer of the deepest saints. I have wept with many of them, and prayed and waited to see what their response would be. And, though they are not all as eloquent as Sarah Edwards, they all, sooner or later, say something like what she said.

SARAH EDWARDS’S SOVEREIGN GOD

Her husband Jonathan Edwards had been away from home for some weeks in 1758 to assume the presidency of Princeton College. On February 13 he was inoculated for smallpox; but the cure became the killer, and he died from the inoculation on March 22, 1758. He was fifty-four years old and left his wife with ten children. When Sarah heard of her husband’s death, the first letter she wrote was to her daughter Esther:

My very dear child!

What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.

Your affectionate mother,

Sarah Edwards¹⁵

I believe with all my heart that the biblical teaching of God’s sovereignty over Satan is the greatest answer in the world when the very meaning of life is threatened by the horrors and tragedies of death and disease. It is the answer of Scripture and it is true and full of hope.

The Bible does not teach that Satan has the highest control in the

15. Sereno Dwight, “Memoirs,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. S. Dwight, 1 (1834: repr. ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), clxxix.

world. God is shown to be the controller of the wind in Genesis 8:1; Exodus 14:21; 15:10; Psalm 78:26; 107:25; 148:8; Isaiah 11:15; and Jonah 1:4; 4:8. There is a possible exception in the book of Job. In Job 1:11–12, God gives Satan the freedom to attack all that Job has, including his family. Then in Job 1:19 “a great wind” levels the house where Job’s children are and kills them all. The text doesn’t say who caused the wind to blow. But in Job 1:21 Job himself says, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” So even if Satan has a hand in making the wind blow, Job knows that behind Satan is the real Ruler of the world and the wind, namely, the Lord.¹⁶ So he says, “The LORD has taken away.” Should Job have said this? The writer takes away all doubt that Job is right to say this, because in the next verse (1:22) he says, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” Neither did Isaiah when he quoted God as saying, “I form light and create darkness, I make comfort and create calamity, I am the LORD, who

16. It is true that Satan has remarkable freedom to “rule” this world. He is called the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31); and “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4); and “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). He offers Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” if he would bow down to him (Luke 4:5–7). Nevertheless God is clearly pictured in the Bible as holding sway over the world, even though Satan is called the “god of this world.” For example, the authority of governing rulers in the world is from God (Romans 13:1) including Pilate’s as he condemns Jesus (John 19:10–11); it is God who “removes kings and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:20–21); “he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” (Daniel 4:34–35); and “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Proverbs 21:1; see also Ezra 1:1; 6:22).

Even though Luke 22:3 says that Satan entered into Judas and brought about the final betrayal of Jesus to the Jews, nevertheless Peter asserts that behind Satan, God was guiding all things: “This Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23); indeed, “Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [did] whatever [God’s] hand and plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28). But all these satanically influenced and divinely guided leaders failed in their opposition to God. For “the Lord brings the counsel of the nations to naught; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (Psalm 33:10–11; Isaiah 43:13). Of every attack on God’s people in the world it can be said, “Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and calamity come?” (Lamentations 3:37–38). “Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6). Yet we must always be aware that in his mysterious dealings with the world and with his own people the principle stands sure: “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

Behind Satan’s limited freedom to act is the hand of a sovereign God guiding all things for the good of his people (Romans 8:28). Compare the activity of God and Satan in these three pairs of texts: 1 Chronicles 21:1 and 2 Samuel 24:1; Luke 22:31 and 22:32; 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Romans 11:25.

The defeat and downfall of Satan is decisively accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus and will come to pass without fail. This is seen in Matthew 8:29; 16:18; 25:41; Luke 10:17–18; 11:21–22; John 17:15; 1 John 2:14; 3:8; 5:18; Romans 8:37–39; 16:20; Hebrews 2:14–15; Colossians 1:13; 2:15; and Revelation 20:10. Therefore in the present age we are called to resist Satan by our faith in the triumph over him that has been accomplished and assured by Jesus. This is seen in James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9; Ephesians 6:10–13; Acts 26:18; 2 Timothy 2:24–26; Romans 16:19–20; and 2 Corinthians 11:3.

does all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). Nor did Jeremiah err when he said, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil [i.e., calamity] come?” (Lamentations 3:38). Nor Amos when he said, “Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6).

So when Psalm 135 says that the Lord does whatever he pleases, it has to include the taking of personal life through wind and sea which he alone controls. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. He is the source of all life (Acts 17:25) and he appoints the time for its return (1 Samuel 2:6; Deuteronomy 32:39). James takes this for granted when he tells us that we should reckon with the sovereign control of God even in our ordinary business plans.

Come now you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain,” whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.” As it is you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” (James 4:13–16)

James assumes that it is the will of the Lord that determines whether anyone gets from one town to another. For him it is a matter of humility to give God this right and a matter of arrogance to act, not to mention teach, that it is not so.

But there is a second reason we can't limit the freedom of God in Psalm 135 to the natural realm. The psalm goes farther than just saying that God causes wind and lightning. In verses 8–10 it says that God's sovereign freedom was shown most vividly in the Exodus when he delivered Israel from Egypt: “He it was who smote the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and of beast...who smote many nations and slew mighty kings....” Therefore when the psalmist says in verse 6 that “whatever the LORD pleases, he does,” he doesn't just refer *implicitly* to the tragedies owing to wind; he also refers *explicitly* to the destruction of rebellious Egyptians and nations and kings. This is the scope of what God does when he does all he pleases.

So in Ezekiel it says that God is *not pleased* with the death of unrepentant people, and in Psalm 135 it says that God does whatever he pleases including the slaying of unrepentant people, for example, the enemies of his people in Egypt. And the very same Hebrew verb is used in Psalm 135:6 (“he pleases”) and Ezekiel 18:32 (“he does not have pleasure”).

MAKING THE PROBLEM WORSE

Before I suggest a solution to this problem, let me make it worse.

Many Christians today have a conception of God that isn't troubled by his being cornered into doing things he doesn't want to do. And I can easily imagine that one response to what we have seen so far would be to say that we have created an artificial problem because Psalm 135 doesn't actually say that God takes delight in destroying the Egyptians. Perhaps someone would say that “doing whatever he pleases” in Psalm 135:6 is just a figure of speech and doesn't carry the sense of pleasure or delight. And so they would say that God only grieves when he must judge unrepentant sinners, and there is no sense in which he is doing what he is pleased to do.

In answer to this I would say again that the same word used in Psalm 135:6 for God's being “pleased” in all that he does is used in Ezekiel 18:32 for God's not being “pleased” with the death of unrepentant sinners. And I would refer to the discussion of this word (*haphētz*) earlier in the chapter. Then I would direct attention to Deuteronomy 28:63 where Moses warns of coming judgment on unrepentant Israel. But this time it says something strikingly different from Ezekiel 18:32:

And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, *so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you.*

So we are brought back to the inescapable fact that in some sense God does not delight in the death of the wicked (that is the message of Ezekiel 18), and in some sense he does (that is the message implicitly of Psalm 135:6–11 and explicitly of Deuteronomy 28:63). In other words, one cannot simply oppose the thesis of this chapter (that God has pleasure in all

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

THE INFINITELY COMPLEX EMOTIONAL LIFE OF GOD

The answer I propose is that God is grieved in one sense by the death of the wicked, and pleased in another.¹⁷ God's emotional life is infinitely complex beyond our ability to fully comprehend. For example, who can comprehend that the Lord hears in one moment of time the prayers of 10 million Christians around the world, and sympathizes with each one personally and individually as a caring Father (as Hebrews 4:15 says), even though among those 10 million prayers some are brokenhearted and some are bursting with joy? How can God weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice when they are both coming to him at the same time—in fact, are always coming to him with no break at all? Or who can comprehend that God is angry at the sin of the world every day (Psalm 7:11), and yet every day, every moment, he is rejoicing with tremendous joy because somewhere in the world a sinner is repenting (Luke 15:7, 10, 23)? Who can comprehend that God continually burns with hot anger at the rebellion of the wicked and grieves over the unholy speech of his people (Ephesians 4:29–30), yet takes pleasure in them daily (Psalm 149:4), and ceaselessly makes merry over penitent prodigals who come home? Who of us could dare say what complex of emotions is not possible for God? All we have to go on here is what he has chosen to tell us in the Bible. And what he has told us is that there is a sense in which he does not experience pleasure in the judgment of the wicked, and there is a sense in which he does.

17. A fuller description of this proposed solution, especially as Jonathan Edwards worked it out, is given in *Desiring God*, 39–42.

THE PAINFUL JOY OF JUSTICE

From this I conclude that the death and misery of the unrepentant is in and of itself no delight to God. God is not a sadist. He is not malicious or bloodthirsty. Instead, when a rebellious, wicked, unbelieving person is judged, what God delights in is the exaltation of truth and righteousness, and the vindication of his own honor and glory.¹⁸ (For further discussion of God's heart in judgment see chapter 5, "How Is God Like George Washington?", 147–149.)

When Moses warns Israel that the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon them and destroying them if they do not repent (Deuteronomy 28:63), he means that those who have rebelled against the Lord and moved beyond repentance will not be able to gloat that they have made the Almighty miserable. God is not defeated in the triumphs of his righteous judgment. Quite the contrary. Moses says that when they are judged they will unwittingly provide an occasion for God to rejoice in the demonstration of his justice and his power and the infinite worth of his glory (see also Romans 9:22–23).¹⁹

Let this be a warning to us. God is not mocked. He is not trapped or cornered or coerced. Even on the way to Calvary he had legions of angels at his disposal. "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord"—of his own good *pleasure*, for the *joy* that was set before him. At the one point in the history of the universe where God looked

18. This is the way Jonathan Edwards tackled the problem of how God and the saints in heaven will be happy in heaven for all eternity knowing that many millions of people are suffering in hell forever. It is not that suffering is pleasant to God and the saints in itself, but that the vindication of God's infinite holiness is cherished so deeply. See John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 33–38.

19. I have tried to give a careful, exegetical account of this interpretation of Romans 9:22–23 in *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983). From the one passing reference to this study in *A Case for Arminianism* (see note 5), it seems that serious attention has not been paid to the arguments I gave there. Pinnock has a legitimate concern that Romans 9 be interpreted with an awareness of Romans 10 and 11 in view. He said, "I believe that if Piper had moved forward in Romans beyond Romans 9, he would have encountered Paul's earnest prayer to God that the lost be saved (10:1) and his explanation of how it happens that any are actually included or excluded—through faith or the lack of it (11:20). Romans 9 must be read in the context of the larger context of Romans 9–11" (29, note 10). I certainly don't want to disagree that Romans 9 must be read in its context. That is why, for example on pages 9–15 and 163–165, I discussed the limits of my focus and the structure of Romans 9–11. With regard to Pinnock's two specific points: we are indeed included or excluded in salvation on the condition of faith. But that does not account for how one person comes to faith and not another. Nor does Paul's "heart's desire and prayer to God" for the salvation of the Jews in Romans 10:1 contradict the explicit statement that "a hardening has come [from God] upon part of Israel until [God lifts it after] the full number of the Gentiles [appointed by God for salvation] come in" (Romans 11:25).

trapped, he was in charge, doing precisely what he pleased—dying to justify the ungodly like you and me.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The sovereignty of God is a precious reality for me and for many people in my church. How many times have we gotten word of some heart-wrenching calamity in one of our church families! We have gone to our knees before the Lord and cried out to him for their help and comfort. Time and again I have heard my people submit themselves to the sovereign will of God and seek his good purposes in it. Once a tornado ripped through our area, destroying homes and stores and uprooting huge trees. It was a Sunday afternoon. That evening we prayed. Even today, years later, I can recall a woman calling on God for mercy for the victims, and then lifting her voice to extol God for his power in the roaring wind, and asking him that we all be humbled and brought to repentance before such majestic authority.

The son of one of our former deacons was run over by a motor boat. He lived, but his knees were badly damaged, and there were superficial nicks on his chest and neck from the propeller. When his father testified in a deacon meeting, he said that his main comfort and lesson was the sovereignty of God. “God has his purposes for the life of my son,” he said, “and for the whole family. This will turn out for the good of all of us as we trust in him. God could have taken my son with another half-inch difference. But instead he said to the blade: ‘This far and no farther.’”

God does not always stop the blade. On December 16, 1974, he did not save my mother’s life. She was riding with my father on a touring bus heading toward Bethlehem in Israel. A van with lumber tied on the roof swerved out of its lane and hit the bus head on. The lumber came through the windows and killed my mother instantly. The death certificate said, “lacerated medulla oblongata.” When we saw her body ten days later, after the funeral home did the best it could, my sister fainted. My father wept alone over the coffin for a long time.

Then I went in and shut it for the last time. We used pictures at the visitation.

What was my comfort in those days? There were many. She suffered

little. I had her for twenty-eight years as the best mother imaginable. She had known my wife and one of my children. She was now in heaven with Jesus. Her life was rich with good deeds and its good effects would last long after she was gone. And underneath all these comforts, supporting all my unanswered questions, and calming my heart, there was the confidence that God is in control and God is good. I took no comfort from the prospect that God could not control the flight of a four-by-four. For me there was no consolation in haphazardness. Nor in giving Satan the upper hand. As I knelt by my bed and wept, having received the dreaded phone call from my brother-in-law, I never doubted that God was sovereign over this accident and that God was good. I do not need to explain everything. That he reigns and that he loves is enough for now.

So let us stand in awe and wonder of God—eternally happy in the fellowship of the Trinity; infinitely exuberant in the wisdom of his work; free and sovereign in his self-sufficiency. “Our God is in heaven; he does all that he pleases.” Let us humble ourselves under his mighty hand, and rejoice that his counsel will stand, and that one day all the families of the nations shall worship before him; for dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations!

THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN HIS CREATION

*May the glory of the LORD endure forever,
may the LORD rejoice in his works.*

P S A L M 1 0 4 : 3 1

THE COTTAGE IN GEORGIA WOODS—JULY, 1990

Two nights ago I took a kitchen chair, put it in the grass beside the cottage and sat down to watch the moon. Ordinarily I live beside a busy freeway in downtown Minneapolis where the car lights and street lights hide the sky. But for these few weeks of vacation and study-leave, I live with Noël and our sons on the outskirts of Barnesville, Georgia, on a piece of wooded property called “Brightwood.” There are no street lights and no freeways. We sleep in a little cottage down the hill from where my wife’s parents live. Just across the barbed wire fence there is a tiny “mobile study” about sixteen-by-eight-feet with windows on two sides. It sits in a clearing surrounded by two-hundred-year-old oak trees and eighty-foot arrow-straight Georgia pines mingled with maple and sweet gum trees. This is where I sit and write and, between paragraphs, stare out over the four-acre lake at the bottom of the hill.

This is a place made for eyes and ears and nose and skin, and a big heart. Almost every day I simply stop and stand still between the cottage and the study or between the lake and the woods or on the hill going up to “the house”—I feel so moved by the beauty of this amazing world of sight and sound and smell and touch that I want the moment to last long enough for all the beauty to soak in and to stay.

Coming down to the cottage from the house the other day, I stopped at a rotting stump and broke off a piece of wood. It was surprisingly hard and snapped instead of crumbling. I looked and saw that the broken part was streaked and reddish and even moist. I put it to my nose and was jolted by the best cedar fragrance I have ever smelled. All the way to the cottage I kept inhaling this amazing aroma from a piece of wood that has probably been dead for ten years.

About fifty yards from the cottage, toward the pecan orchard, we are cultivating a worm bed. There’s a pile of mulch with some old tires and cement bricks and a wooden door lying on the mulch to keep it moist underneath. We water it now and then with the hose. When we want some worms we lift up the door and turn over the tires and blocks and let the granddaddy longlegs scatter by the hundreds. Then I use the pitchfork to scrape off the top layer of mulch while my seven-year-old son spots the crawlers and wigglers, snatches them with his hand and puts them in a bucket. They are floppy and fast. But Barnabas is faster.

Three or four times a day I stoop down to go under the barbed wire fence between the study and the cottage. There is a big pink rope wrapped around the wire so that we won’t get snagged. The metal post, holding the wire where we crawl through, is hollow. To our amazement we discovered that a little gray tree frog lives in the post. There is a little water in the hollow and he goes up or comes down in the post according to the heat and the light. He will let us walk right up to him as he sits on the edge of the post in the evening. It is clearly his place, because he has been there for several weeks now and nothing we do chases him away. This has made me wonder about all the other tree frogs that at night produce such an incredible whirring and buzzing and scratching in these peaceful woods (along with the crickets and cicadas). I have wondered if all the tree frogs are as possessive of their turf as he is. If so,

there are thousands of little knotholes and crooks and branches all staked out and claimed by their own little tree frogs. It must be an amazing world of turf and territorialism up in those trees that completely escapes us humans.

Where we swim, at the north end of the lake, the fish eat freckles and moles and chigger bites and other assorted blemishes on my back and legs. So I have to keep moving in the water, or go out in the deep part. The water is generally warm like a bath on the surface and wonderfully cool down under. But what I like best about the water is the way it looks from the window of my study. It is always moving peacefully. And early in the morning it catches the sun with ten thousand flashes and makes a constant display of crystal pieces moving on the surface. The leaves between me and the lake turn green-yellow-black-and-back-to-greenish-yellow as the breeze conspires with the reflections of the lake and the shadows to make the whole hillside burst with golden light and life.

To stay fit, I run about three mornings a week—early enough to avoid the 95-degree heat we have been having most of this visit. I set my new stopwatch that I got for Father's Day and take off about 7:15. I run up Atlanta Street toward town, turn right on the two-block-long Main Street, run past the two banks, the First Methodist Church, and the library, and head out of town on the other side passing the old mansions with gigantic trees in their front yards that go back past the Civil War days to the times of the Revolution. I assume all the dogs in Barnesville have been attacked by humans because if they ever start barking at me all I have to do is stoop down like I am picking up a stick and they turn and run away. About twenty minutes out I make a U-turn and find a new way back for variety. It takes me past the cemetery. (How desolate is a cemetery without trees!) It takes me by First Baptist and then the pecan praline plant; then across the kudzu gully and the pasture where they keep Flash, the asthmatic horse. By now I am soaked in sweat. My legs are numb, so they don't hurt. But the enemy is the heat. Sweat pours off my head and down my face. (I always forget to wear the headband.) It is salty to the taste and burns my eyes. Some mornings my lungs and heart just can't get enough coolant and oxygen to the muscles to keep me going and I have to walk for a while. This morning it was cool enough

to keep on going for about four-and-a-half miles without stopping. I even sprinted the last fifty yards to win an imaginary race. Ah, the glory of exhaustion and triumph!

REAL LIFE IS PHYSICAL

The point of all this happy rambling is to say that real life is physical. It has to do with touch and smell and sight and sound and taste. It has to do with trees and stumps and fish and frogs and ants and birds and leaves and water and heat and slaw and iced tea and numb thighs and salty sweat and worms and granddaddy longlegs and ten thousand other creatures and sensations that come to us because God made a physical world.

As I said, two nights ago I took a kitchen chair and went outside at about 10:30 and sat down to watch the moon. It's been making a lower and lower arc over the southeastern hemisphere these last nights. This night it was just above the power lines that trespass with modern technology on this little Georgia paradise. The moon was almost full. The gray-orange face was pocked with beautiful gray blemishes. The constant caressing of the thin clouds could do nothing to cleanse the old man. His defects are too deep and too old.

I sat there and soaked again in the lavish beauty of the sky and the droning crickets and tree frogs, with the soft breeze on my face and the smell of pine; and I marveled that God, who is spirit and cannot be seen or touched, would make an ocean of physical reality that smells and shines and feels and tastes and sounds. As C. S. Lewis said,

There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it...

I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure, were bad in themselves. But they were wrong. Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the

body—which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, and that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty, and our energy.¹

I admit that when I sit beneath the beauty of a Georgia moon or look out over an early morning lake or marvel at the age and strength of a great tree, I wrestle with doubts that this much joy should come from material things. I touched on this problem in *Desiring God* (142–143) and explained how I have resolved it in my own experience.² But I did not raise the problem for God himself.

So there are two questions that I want to raise in this chapter: 1) Does God take pleasure in his creation? And 2) if so, what becomes of the fullness of delight that he has in his Son? Why is God not an idolater to love the creation?

DOES GOD LIKE THE WORLD?

The first question I would answer with a resounding, “Yes!” God *does* take pleasure in his creation. How do we know this? Genesis 1 describes for us not only the fact of a well-ordered creation by God, but also God’s

1. Quoted from C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Clyde Kilby (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 210–211.

2. The problem was raised there especially by the psalms. For example, Psalm 73:25–26 says,
 Whom have I in heaven but you?
 And there is nothing upon earth
 that I desire besides you.
 My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart
 and my portion for ever.

And Psalm 27:4 says,
 One thing have I asked of the LORD,
 that will I seek after;
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
 all the days of my life,
 to behold the beauty of the LORD,
 and to inquire in his temple.

These psalms seem to say that a true saint will be so filled with joy in God that the joys of material things, like moonlit nights, will not be able to add anything. They seem to say that the only joy we should have is joy in God, not in the creation. But St. Augustine said something that was very helpful in putting it all together. He prayed like this: “He loves Thee too little who loves anything together with Thee which he loves not for thy sake.” Quoted from Henry Bettenson, ed., *Confessions*, in *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54. What Augustine showed me was that there is a way to delight in God’s creation that is not for its sake but for God’s sake. Discovering how to do that is the secret of not committing idolatry on moonlit nights and beside sparkling morning lakes and over biyearly catfish feasts.

response to his creation. Six times God stands back, as it were, and takes stock of his creation. Each time the text says, “And God saw that it was *good*” (verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). And when all was finished and man and woman were created in his own image, it says, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*.”

I take this to mean at least that God was delighted with his work. He approved of it. He was glad that he had done it. When he looked at it, it gave him pleasure. It is as though he said, “Yes, that’s it. That will do just fine. That’s exactly right.” And we get the clue early on in the story that the root of his delight in creation has to do with imaging forth his own glory, because only after he created man and woman *in his image* did God add the word “very” to the word “good.”

We can see the joy of God in his creation best, perhaps, in Psalm 104. It is a song to express God’s exuberance over what he has made. The key verse is verse 31:

May the glory of the LORD endure forever,
may the LORD *rejoice* in his works.

This is not a prayer for something that might not happen, as though I were to say, “May Noël make spaghetti for supper tonight.” The psalmist does not mean: “Oh, I hope God will rejoice in his works, but I am not sure he will.” If that were the meaning, then the first line of the verse would have to have the same sense: “Oh, I hope God’s glory will endure forever, but I am not sure it will.” But that is surely not what he means. The rock-solid confidence of the whole Bible is that the glory of the Lord will not only endure forever but that it will cover the whole earth like the waters cover the sea (Numbers 14:21; see also Habakkuk 2:14).

The psalmist is not praying that an uncertainty might come to pass. He is exulting in a certainty that *will* come to pass, and indeed has come to pass and is taking place right now. There is no doubt behind the shout, “May the glory of the LORD endure forever!” And there is no doubt behind the shout: “May the LORD rejoice in his works!”

So the answer to the first question is *yes!* God does take pleasure in his creation, because this whole psalm shows (as we shall see) that the

“works” in mind are the works of creation—things like water and clouds and wind and mountains and thunder and springs and wild asses and birds and grass and cattle and wine and bread and cedars and wild goats and badgers and rocks and young lions and sea monsters. God delights in all the work of his hands.

THE EXULTATION OF HEAVEN AT CREATION

I love the picture that God paints for Job when he is interrogating Job about creation. In Job 38:4–7, God queries,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
 Tell me, if you have understanding,
 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line upon it?
 On what were its bases sunk,
 or who laid its cornerstone,
*when the morning stars sang together,
 and all the sons of God [angels] shouted for joy?*

Do you see the picture? No man was there. So Job should humble himself and realize there are a few things he (and we!) may not understand. But in making this point, God cannot resist, it seems, mentioning what the mood of heaven was like at the moment of creation. “All the sons of God shouted for joy.” All the angels had evidently been created before the universe. And it is not hard to see why. God meant there to be an audience when he created the world. I am sure he said, “Watch this!” when he spoke the galaxies into existence. Imagine the awe and wonder that exploded among the angels. They had never seen or even imagined matter. They are all “ministering *spirits*” (Hebrews 1:14) and have no material bodies as we do. When God brought material stuff into existence with all its incredible variety and utterly unheard-of qualities of sight and sound and smell and touch and taste, this was totally unknown to the angels. God had made it all up. It was not like the unveiling of a new painting made of all the colors and paints we are all familiar with. It was absolutely, totally, unimaginably new! And the response of the sons of God was to shout for joy.

Now I admit that God does not say explicitly in this text that he himself shouted for joy. But do you suppose that God sat by with a blank face and no emotion, while millions of holy angels shouted for joy over his creation? Something would be very out of sync in heaven if that were true. I think God told Job about the joy of the “sons of God” because sons get their dispositions from their Father. If the finite sons were shouting for joy over the greatness and wonder of the Father’s creation, you can be sure that the Father’s delight both in the creation and in the sons’ joy was immense.

Now the question is, *why?* Why does God have pleasure in his creation? There are two reasons why this question is important to me.

SHOULD THE SON BE JEALOUS?

One is that I feel compelled to explain why this pleasure God has in his creation is not an act of idolatry. Why is it not a dishonor to the Son of God? Why shouldn’t the Son be jealous? Should the Father really share his affection with the world? Should he not be totally satisfied in the beauty of his own perfections reflected back to him in the person of his Son?

The other reason for asking why God delights in his creation is that we need to know this before the delight itself can tell us very much about God’s character. Two people can desire the same thing for such different reasons that one is honorable and the other is perverse. (One man might want grain to make bread; another might want it to make booze.) Our aim is to see the true glory and worth of God. And our assumption is that “the worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.” So we want to see what God loves—what he has pleasure in. But this assumes that we understand why God loves a thing. Unless we know why God has pleasure in creation we will not be able to draw any clear conclusions about what this pleasure implies about God’s worth and excellence.

I will try to sum up my answer to this second question in five statements based mainly on Psalm 104 as well as some other parts of Scripture. These five statements about why God delights in his creation are not really five separate reasons because they overlap so much. But they each express a little differently the basic reason. It helps to appreciate the true beauty of

a precious stone when you turn it in the light and look at it from different angles. And we will see that the answer to this second question also answers the first, namely, why God's love for nature is not idolatry.

WHAT DAY AND NIGHT PROCLAIM

First, God rejoices in his works because his works express his glory. I see this first in Psalm 104:31:

May the *glory* of the LORD endure forever,
 May the LORD rejoice in his works.

What these two lines show is that God enjoys his works because they express his glory. In other words, the two halves of this verse are related something like this: "As long as the *glory* of the LORD endures in his works, God will indeed rejoice in his works." Or you could say, "May the glory of the LORD endure forever, *so that* the LORD may rejoice in his works."

I find this idea confirmed in Psalm 19:1–2:

The heavens are telling the *glory of God*;
 and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
 Day to day pours forth speech,
 and night to night declares knowledge.

It is clear that there is one main message creation has to communicate to human beings, namely, the glory of God. Not primarily the glory of creation, but the glory of God. The glory of creation and the glory of God are as different as the love poem and the love, the painting and the landscape, the ring and the marriage. It would be a great folly and a great tragedy if a man loved his wedding band more than he loved his bride. But that is what Romans 1:19–23 says has happened. Human beings have fallen in love with the echo of God's excellency in creation and lost the ability to hear the incomparable original shout of love.

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his

invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God *they did not glorify him as God* or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and *exchanged the glory of the immortal God* for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

The message of creation is this: *there is a great God of glory and power and generosity behind all this awesome universe; you belong to him; he is patient with you in sustaining your rebellious life; turn and bank your hope on him and delight yourself in him, not his handiwork.* Day pours forth the “speech” of that message to all that will listen in the day, speaking with blindingly bright sun and blue sky and clouds and untold shapes and colors of all things visible. Night pours forth the “knowledge” of the same message to all who will listen at night, speaking with great dark voids and summer moons and countless stars and strange sounds and cool breezes and northern lights. Day and night are saying one thing: God is glorious! God is glorious! God is glorious!

This is the most basic reason that God delights in his creation. In creation he sees the reflection of his own glory. This is why he is not an idolater when he has pleasure in the work of his hands.

CREATION AND CHRIST

But what about the Son of God? Does this mean that the creation is in competition with the Son for the affection of the Father? Remember that the Son too is called the radiance of God’s glory (Hebrews 1:3). Does God delight partly in the Son and partly in the creation? Does the creation rob the Son of any of the Father’s delight? Should the Son be jealous of the creation?

No. Before creation the Father and the Son rejoiced in each other with overflowing satisfaction. That was the point of chapter 1. When the time came for creation, the Bible says that *both* the Father *and* the Son were active in the work of creation. The Father had not wearied of the

Son and decided to create another enjoyment to make up for his disappointment with the Son. This is plain from Scripture:

For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6)

By him [Christ] all things were created. (Colossians 1:16)

In these last days he [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrews 1:2)

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. (John 1:1, 3)

In other words, the work of creation is not merely the work of the Father as though he had to satisfy a need that the Son couldn't meet. Nor was creation merely the work of the Son as though he had to satisfy some need that the Father couldn't meet. Instead it was the work of both of them together. And the impulse was not deficiency of delight but a spilling over of mutual joy. Jonathan Edwards expresses it like this: "Surely it is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow."³ If someone should ask whether God was less happy before the Father and the Son released their joyful creative energy, Edwards answers, "Though these communications of God [in creation]—these exercises, operations, and expressions of his glorious perfections, which God rejoices in—are in time; yet his joy in them is without beginning or change. They were always equally present in the divine mind."⁴

So when the Bible teaches that creation expresses the glory of God, we must not think merely of the glory of the Father or the glory of the Son,

3. Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 102.

4. *Ibid.*

but rather the glory that they have together. And the glory that they have together is that overflowing mutual joy in each other's perfections. So creation is an expression of the overflow of that life and joy that the Father and the Son have in each other.⁵ There is no competition or jealousy in the Godhead. The Son and Father are equally glorified in creation, because creation is the overflow of gladness that they have in each other.

So the first and most basic statement we can make about why God rejoices in his work of creation is that creation is an expression of his glory.

NO HUMANS HEAR THE PRAISE OF THE DEEPS

Second, God rejoices in the works of creation because they praise him. In Psalm 148 the psalmist calls on creation itself to praise the Lord:

Praise him, sun and moon,
 praise him, all you shining stars!
 Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters above the heavens!
 Let them praise the name of the LORD!
 For he commanded and they were created...
 Praise the LORD from the earth,
 you sea monsters and all deeps.
 (verses 3–5, 7)

Again in Psalm 103:22 David cries out,

Bless the LORD, all his works,
 In all places of his dominion.

What does this mean? We might say that sun and moon and stars praise God by testifying to us about God. That would be true, as we have just seen (Romans 1:19–23). But what about Psalm 148:7? “Praise the LORD you sea monsters *and all deeps!*” What human is in the deeps to hear this praise?

5. It would not be wrong, I think, to say that this is why the Bible says, “The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit is the life and joy of the Father and the Son, standing forth with so much of the perfection and fullness of each of them that he too is a divine Person. See chapter 1, note 24.

One of my favorite poems is “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” written by Thomas Gray in 1751. One of the stanzas says,

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Gray had been moved by the thought that on the bottom of the ocean there were beautiful gems that no human eye would ever see, and that in distant deserts millions of flowers would bloom, blush with vivid colors, give off a sweet fragrance, and never be touched or seen or smelled by anybody but God!

God, it seems, wanted Job to think about this very thing. He asked him, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? . . . Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man . . . Do you know when the mountain goats bring forth? Do you observe the calving of the hinds?” (Job 38:16, 25–26; 39:1). In other words, God was claiming that he alone sees the deeps of the ocean and brings rain in the desert where no man is and watches, like a midwife, at the birth of every mountain goat and wild deer.

This is what moves the psalmist in Psalm 148:7, “Praise the LORD you sea monsters and all deeps!” He doesn’t even know what is in all the deeps of the sea! So the praise of the deeps is not merely what they can testify to man. Creation praises God by simply being what it was created to be in all its incredible variety. And since most of the creation is beyond the awareness of mankind (in the reaches of space, and in the heights of mountains and at the bottom of the sea) it wasn’t created merely to serve purposes that have to do with us. It was created for the enjoyment of God.

RANGER RICK IS A THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

I have a confession to make. *Ranger Rick* is one of my favorite magazines. When it used to arrive in our house with the address, “Piper Boys,” I was one of the first Piper boys to take it to the couch. The reason is simple:

in spite of its utterly unwarranted and unnecessary evolutionary bias, it inspires more praise in me than most other journals. It is a monthly record of man's discovery of incredible phenomena in nature that up till recently have only been enjoyed by God for thousands of years.

For example, I read about the European water spider that lives at the bottom of a lake, but breathes air.⁶ It comes to the top of the water, does a somersault on the surface and catches a bubble of air. Then it holds the bubble over the breathing holes in the middle of its body while it swims to the bottom of the lake and spins a silk web among the seaweed. It goes up and brings down bubble after bubble until a little balloon of air is formed under its silk web where it can live and eat and mate. When I read that, there was a moment of worship on our living-room couch. Doesn't that make you want to shout, "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Psalm 104:24)?

I sat there with my mouth open, and I think God smiled and said, "Yes, John, and I have been enjoying that little piece of art since before the days of Abraham. And if you only knew how many millions of other wonders there are beyond your sight that I behold with gladness every day!"

Consider sea monsters that we virtually never see. Psalm 104:25–26 says,

Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
 which teems with things innumerable,
 living things both small and great.
 There go the ships,
 and Leviathan which you formed to sport in it.

Why did God create great sea monsters? Just to play, to frolic in the ocean where no man can see, but only God. The teeming ocean declares the glory of God, and praises him a thousand miles from any human eye. That's the second reason God rejoices in his works.

6. Ellen Holtzen, "Home Is a Bubble," *Ranger Rick* (January 1987): 14–15.

WISDOM BEYOND COMPREHENSION

Third, God rejoices in the works of creation because they reveal his incomparable wisdom. This is the point of Psalm 104:24.

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.

“*In wisdom* you have made them all!” In other words, the Lord delights in the expressions of his wisdom. This universe is a masterpiece of wisdom and order. Or if you just take a part of it, like the human body—what an amazing work of knowledge and wisdom! Who can fathom the human brain and the mystery of how mind and body work together? Whether you look near or far, whether you look for bigness or smallness, the wonders of nature stagger the mind with the wisdom woven through it all.

Did you know that there are ten thousand known species of diatoms? In a teaspoon of ordinary lake water there may be a million of these tiny invisible plants. And what are they doing while entertaining God with their microscopic beauty? (I know they are beautiful because *Ranger Rick* had magnified color photographs!) What are they doing? They are making tons and tons of oxygen so that the animals in the water can breathe! The world is full of the wisdom of God!

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all.

The psalmist marveled at how everything works together so wisely.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
 and plants for man to cultivate,
 that he may bring forth food from the earth.

(Psalm 104:14)

What a wonderful experience it is when God grants us a moment in which we don't take anything for granted, but see the world as though it was invented yesterday. How we would marvel at the wisdom of God. We should pray for the eyes of children again, when they saw everything for the first time. William Quayle reminded me of this recently in his lively book, *The Pastor-Preacher*. He said, "A cow has pretty eyes, as quiet as a pool of quiet water, but uneventful eyes. There is no touch of wonder in their dreamless depths. The eyes are therefore soulless. A child's eyes are fairly lightning. They are to see things: they are the windows of the brain, and bewilder like a play of swords of fire."⁷ These are the eyes we need to see the unending wisdom of God running through all the world. There will be no exhausting the understanding of God. We will be making new discoveries for all eternity.

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth,
He does not faint or grow weary,
his understanding is unsearchable.
(Isaiah 40:28)

POWER WITHOUT EQUAL

Fourth, God rejoices in the works of creation because they reveal his incomparable power. In Isaiah 40:26, Isaiah looks up at the star-filled sky—perhaps on a night like I remember on a mountain in Utah in September 1968, when the sky was literally a sheet of light, and star could not be distinguished from star—he looks up and says,

Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power
not one is missing.

7. William A. Quayle, *The Pastor-Preacher*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 76–77.

If Isaiah was stunned at the power of God to create and name and sustain every star in the heaven that he could see, what would be his worship today if he were shown that the nearest of those stars in his sky, Alpha Centauri and Proxima Centauri are twenty-five million million miles away? And what would be his worship if he knew that what he was seeing in his night sky was a tiny patch of our galaxy which has in it a hundred billion stars, and that beyond our galaxy there are millions of galaxies?

It seems in recent decades that God is enjoying keeping the astronomers on the edge of their seats with new glimpses of his power. In the fall of 1989, newspapers reported the discovery by two Harvard astronomers of a “Great Wall” of galaxies stretching hundreds of millions of light years across the known universe. The wall is supposedly some five hundred million light years long, two hundred million light years wide and fifteen million light years thick. In case your high school astronomy has grown fuzzy, a light year is a little less than six trillion (6,000,000,000,000) miles. This Great Wall consists of more than fifteen thousand galaxies, each with millions of stars, and was described as the “largest single coherent structure seen so far in nature.”⁸

I say “was described” because three months later in February 1990, God opened another little window for tiny man to marvel again, and the newspapers reported that astronomers have discovered more than a dozen evenly distributed clumps of galaxies stretching across vast expanses of the heavens, suggesting a structure to the universe that is so regular and immense that it defies current theories of cosmic origins. The newly found pattern of galactic matter dwarfs the extremely long sheet of galaxies, dubbed the “great wall” (now written without caps!), that was reported in November 1989 to be the largest structure in the universe. They now say the great wall is, in fact, merely one of the closest of these clumps, or regions, that contain very high concentrations of galaxies.⁹

What is this universe but the lavish demonstration of the incredible, incomparable, unimaginable exuberance and wisdom and power and greatness of God! What a God he must be!

8. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (18 November 1989): 13A.

9. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (23 February 1990): 2A.

GOD AND GOD ALONE

Fifth, God rejoices in the works of creation because they point us beyond themselves to God himself. God means for us to be stunned and awed by his work of creation. But not for its own sake. He means for us to look at his creation and say: If the mere work of his fingers (just his fingers! Psalm 8:3) is so full of wisdom and power and grandeur and majesty and beauty, what must this God be like in himself!

These are but the backside of his glory, as it were, darkly seen through a glass. What will it be to see the Creator himself! Not his works! A billion galaxies will not satisfy the human soul. God and God alone is the soul's end. Jonathan Edwards expressed it like this:

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. . . . [These] are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the ocean.¹⁰

This is why Psalm 104 (vv. 31–34) comes to a close like this, with a focus on God himself:

May the glory of the LORD endure forever,
 may the LORD rejoice in his works,
 who looks on the earth and it trembles,
 who touches the mountains and they smoke!
 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
 I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
 for I rejoice *in the LORD*.

In the end it will not be the seas or the mountains or the canyons or the water spiders or the clouds or the great galaxies that fill our hearts to breaking with wonder and fill our mouths with eternal praise. It will be God

10. "The Christian Pilgrim," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2, 244.

himself. This is why God has pleasure in his creation. It is the overflow of the satisfaction that God the Father and God the Son have in each other and therefore the revelation and proclamation of God's glory day and night.

CLYDE KILBY'S RESOLUTIONS

As I close this chapter, I recall a lecture given by Clyde Kilby in Minneapolis on October 22, 1976, at the First Covenant Church. I attended mainly to see him because he had been one of my favorite teachers at Wheaton College where I was a literature major in his department. I recall the evening because what he said there is so relevant to what I am trying to do in this chapter. One of the things I would like to happen because of this chapter is that readers would open their eyes even wider to the glory of God in the world around them. Kilby had eyes. Oh, what eyes he had! He read to us eleven resolutions he had made for staying alive to God's glory. I will only mention one in closing.¹¹ He said, "I shall

11. The other ten of Kilby's resolutions are worthy of serious reflection:

- (1) At least once every day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet traveling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above and about me.
- (2) Instead of the accustomed idea of a mindless and endless evolutionary change to which we can neither add nor subtract, I shall suppose the universe guided by an Intelligence which, as Aristotle said of Greek drama, requires a beginning, a middle, and an end. I think this will save me from the cynicism expressed by Bertrand Russell before his death, when he said: "There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing."
- (3) I shall not fall into the falsehood that this day, or any day, is merely another ambiguous and plodding twenty-four hours, but rather a unique event, filled, if I so wish, with worthy potentialities. I shall not be fool enough to suppose that trouble and pain are wholly evil parentheses in my existence but, just as likely, ladders to be climbed toward moral and spiritual manhood.
- (4) I shall not turn my life into a thin straight line which prefers abstractions to reality. I shall know what I am doing when I abstract, which of course I shall often have to do.
- (5) I shall not demean my own uniqueness by envy of others. I shall stop boring into myself to discover what psychological or social categories I might belong to. Mostly I shall simply forget about myself and do my work.
- (6) I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are, but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what Lewis calls their "divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic" existence.
- (7) I shall follow Darwin's advice and turn frequently to imaginative things such as good literature and good music, preferably, as Lewis suggests, an old book and timeless music.
- (8) I shall not allow the devilish onrush of this century to usurp all my energies but will instead, as Charles Williams suggested, "fulfill the moment as the moment." I shall try to live well just now because the only time that exists is now.
- (9) If for nothing more than the sake of a change of view, I shall assume my ancestry to be from the heavens rather than from the caves.
- (10) Even if I turn out to be wrong, I shall bet my life on the assumption that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absentee landlord, but that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course I shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the Architect who calls himself Alpha and Omega.

sometimes look back at the freshness of vision I had in childhood and try, at least for a little while, to be, in the words of Lewis Carroll, the ‘child of the pure unclouded brow, and dreaming eyes of wonder.’”

One of the tragedies of growing up is that we get used to things. It has its good side of course, since irritations may cease to be irritations. But there is immense loss when we get used to the redness of the rising sun, and the roundness of the moon, and the whiteness of the snow, the wetness of rain, the blueness of the sky, the buzzing of bumble bees, the stitching of crickets, the invisibility of wind, the unconscious constancy of heart and diaphragm, the weirdness of noses and ears, the number of the grains of sand on a thousand beaches, the never-ceasing crash crash crash of countless waves, and ten million kingly-clad flowers flourishing and withering in woods and mountain valleys where no one sees but God. I invite you, with Clyde Kilby, to seek a “freshness of vision,” to look, as though it were the first time, not at the empty product of accumulated millennia of aimless evolutionary accidents (which no child ever dreamed of), but at the personal handiwork of an infinitely strong, creative, and exuberant Artist who made the earth and the sea and everything in them. I invite you to believe (like the children believe) “that today, this very day, some stroke is being added to the cosmic canvas that in due course you shall understand with joy as a stroke made by the Architect who calls Himself Alpha and Omega” (note 11, resolution 10).