

JOHN PIPER



120 DAILY MEDITATIONS

A  
GODWARD  
LIFE

Seeing the Supremacy of God in All of Life

# A GODWARD LIFE

120 DAILY READINGS

JOHN PIPER



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To  
David and Karin Livingston  
David and Sally Michael  
Brad and Cindy Nelson



*Precious partners in the Godward life  
who have loved and labored for over ten years with me  
at Bethlehem Baptist Church*

## OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

DESIRING GOD:

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# CONTENTS



PREFACE .....	13
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	15
INTRODUCTION .....	16
1. LOVING GOD FOR WHO HE IS.....	22
<i>A Pastor's Perspective</i>	
2. TODAY'S MERCIES FOR TODAY'S TROUBLES.....	25
<i>Meditation on Matthew 6:34</i>	
3. GOD WAS UP ALL NIGHT.....	28
<i>Meditation on Psalm 121:3</i>	
4. WHEN WORDS ARE WIND.....	31
<i>Meditation on Job 6:26</i>	
5. THE SLOW FIRES OF MISERY .....	33
<i>Enduring the Pain of a Flawed Marriage</i>	
6. FUTURE GRACE.....	36
<i>Pondering the Power We Need for Obedience</i>	
7. GIFT AND GRIT (IN THAT ORDER).....	38
<i>Thoughts on Human Effort and Divine Enabling</i>	
8. DOES IT PAY TO VISIT VERMIN? .....	40
<i>Meditation on James 1:27</i>	
9. IS ZEAL FOR GOOD PRAISED OR PERSECUTED? .....	42
<i>Meditation on 1 Peter 3:13–16</i>	
10. VIOLENCE, UGLINESS, FAITH, AND GRATITUDE.....	45
<i>Thoughts on Arrogance and Sacrilege</i>	
11. YOU SHALL TAKE UP YOUR TAMBOURINES .....	47
<i>On the Whole Counsel of God: A Hedonistic Defense of Doctrine</i>	
12. IT IS GREAT GAIN TO DIE: FIVE REASONS WHY.....	50
<i>Meditation on Philippians 1:21</i>	
13. ENJOYING GOD'S BEING GOD .....	53
<i>Can God Be Impressed by Man?</i>	

14. ONE WAY TO WIELD THE WEAPON OF THE WORD .....	56
<i>What Happened at Luke 18</i>	
15. THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF THE WORD .....	58
<i>Thoughts on Reading and Writing</i>	
16. WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?.....	60
<i>Meditation on 2 Corinthians 5:14–15</i>	
17. MAKING ROOM FOR ATHEISM .....	62
<i>Thoughts on the Supremacy of God in a Pluralistic World</i>	
18. STRONG ENOUGH TO CARE ABOUT THE WEAK .....	65
<i>Jesus and the Children—and Us</i>	
19. O SPARE US THIS REBUKE IN WORSHIP! .....	68
<i>Thoughts on the Handicapped Heart</i>	
20. GRACE FOR A WELL-TIMED HELP.....	71
<i>Meditation on Hebrews 4:16</i>	
21. THE PLACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE TRINITY .....	73
<i>Foundation for Adoration</i>	
22. TRANSCENDENT SPRINGS OF TENDERNESS .....	75
<i>Meditation on Deuteronomy 10:17–19</i>	
23. VERY CALMLY SAY, “YOUR OUTRAGEOUS OPINIONS ARE NOT BASED ON TRUTH” .....	77
<i>Meditation on Ephesians 5:11</i>	
24. THE LORD’S TOUCH .....	79
<i>Meditation on 1 Samuel 10:26</i>	
25. A COMPELLING REASON FOR RIGOROUS TRAINING OF THE MIND.....	81
<i>Thoughts on the Significance of Reading</i>	
26. MONDAY MORNING MEDITATION ON THIRST.....	84
<i>Hearing Jesus in John 4:14</i>	
27. PRECIOUS AND POWERFUL REBUKES.....	86
<i>The Supremacy of Christ over Everything</i>	
28. TALKING TO YOUR TEARS.....	89
<i>Meditation on Psalm 126:5–6</i>	
29. YUPPIES MAKE YUCKY MISSIONARIES.....	91
<i>Thoughts on a Morning Meeting with Jesus</i>	
30. SWEARING TO YOUR OWN HURT .....	94
<i>What to Do When You Make an Expensive Mistake</i>	

31. ON ADVERTISING SEXY MOVIES .....	96
<i>An Open Letter to an Advertiser</i>	
32. LIVING SUPERNATURALLY AS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST .....	99
<i>The Necessity of Living on God</i>	
33. PUTTING THE GODS IN THEIR PLACE.....	102
<i>Meditation on Psalm 82</i>	
34. SETTING OUR MINDS ON THINGS ABOVE IN SUMMER.....	104
<i>Thoughts on Colossians 3:1-2</i>	
35. WHY BEING TRUTH-DRIVEN IS SO CRUCIAL .....	106
<i>Loving God by Loving Truth</i>	
36. THE PAINFUL LESSON OF LEARNING JOY.....	109
<i>There Is No Serving Like This Serving</i>	
37. THE AMERICAN REVIVAL OF 1905 .....	111
<i>Observing the Spirit Blowing Where He Wills</i>	
38. IRVING HETHERINGTON, SELF-PITY, AND SERVICE.....	113
<i>Learning to Follow the Man of Sorrows</i>	
39. PRAYING FOR WHAT CANNOT FAIL.....	115
<i>Pondering the Promises beneath the Prayers</i>	
40. WHEN UNCLOTHED IS UNFITTING .....	117
<i>Thoughts on Selling with Sex</i>	
41. HOW I WAS MOVED TO TEARS .....	120
<i>The Commitment of a Lifetime</i>	
42. THINK DEEPLY AND CLEARLY .....	122
<i>A Dialogue on 2 Timothy 2:7</i>	
43. A PASSION FOR HOLINESS .....	124
<i>The Key to Lasting Effectiveness in the Life of John Owen</i>	
44. THE LOVE OF GOD PAST AND PRESENT.....	126
<i>Meditation on Romans 5:8</i>	
45. SEEKING PEOPLE ON THE STRETCH FOR GOD .....	128
<i>Thoughts on Being Fellow Workers with God</i>	
46. WHY SOME SPIRITUAL GIFTS ATTRACT UNSTABLE PEOPLE .....	131
<i>Thoughts on the Baby or the Bathwater</i>	
47. RESOLUTIONS ON GROWING OLD WITH GOD .....	134
<i>Savoring the Faith of an Old Psalmist</i>	
<i>Reflections on Psalm 71</i>	

48. CONTRACTS, COVENANTS, AND SELF-DEIFICATION .....	137
<i>Thoughts on the Cost of Integrity</i>	
49. BREAKFAST, BENJAMIN, AND BABY-WORK .....	140
<i>How to Receive Jesus</i>	
50. THE IRIS BY MY WALK .....	142
<i>Thoughts on God's Direct Involvement in Creation</i>	
51. PRAYER AND PREDESTINATION .....	144
<i>A Conversation between Prayerful and Prayerless</i>	
52. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO ME .....	147
<i>Meditation on John 12:24–25</i>	
53. BACK TO SCHOOL: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE .....	150
<i>Thinking about Thinking and God</i>	
54. O CROSS OF CHRIST, MY LIBERTY AND POWER! .....	153
<i>Meditation on My Remaining Corruption</i>	
55. COMBUSTIBLE SOUND BITES FROM THE BATTLEFIELD .....	155
<i>Recollections from Lausanne II</i>	
56. BORN TO DIE FOR OUR FREEDOM .....	157
<i>Meditation on Hebrews 2:14–15</i>	
57. MAGNIFICENT MANUMISSION .....	160
<i>Meditation on Romans 6:17–18</i>	
58. WHAT CONDOM ADS PRODUCED .....	162
<i>An Exchange of Letters</i>	
59. NO PRAYER, NO POWER .....	164
<i>Thoughts on the Offense and Defense of Spiritual Life</i>	
60. WHY DO YOU BELIEVE JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD? .....	166
<i>On Having an Answer for the Hope in Us</i>	
61. PICTURE JESUS PLAYING THE LOTTERY .....	169
<i>Dallying with the Soul's Suicide</i>	
62. DID GOD COMMAND A MAN TO EARN HIS LIFE? .....	171
<i>Thoughts on the So-Called Covenant of Works</i>	
63. THE UNMERITED, CONDITIONAL GRACE OF GOD .....	174
<i>Reflections on Psalm 25</i>	
64. LORD-FOCUSED LIVING AT WORK .....	176
<i>Who is Your Supervisor?</i>	
<i>Meditation on Ephesians 6:7-8</i>	
65. FROM MISPLACED SHAME TO MISSION FLAME .....	179
<i>Pondering Some Shame-Shattering Promises</i>	

66. THE LIMITS OF LOVE .....	181
<i>Conflicting Claims and Incurrigible Sinners</i>	
67. ABORTION AS ANARCHY .....	184
<i>The Rights of the Weak and the Will of the Strong</i>	
68. PRACTICAL STEPS TO KILL SIN .....	187
<i>Thoughts on Mortification</i>	
69. THE REPENTANCE OF GOD .....	190
<i>Meditation on the Mind of God</i>	
70. INSTITUTIONS: HAZARDOUS AND HELPFUL .....	192
<i>The Danger of Trusting in Your Horse</i>	
71. TREMBLING WITH JOY OVER MY ESCAPE .....	195
<i>Thoughts about Hell at Christmastime</i>	
72. AN OUTPOURING OF EXTRAORDINARY POWER .....	197
<i>What Is a Revival?</i>	
73. WHY GOD IS NOT AN ABOMINATION TO HIMSELF .....	199
<i>Meditation on Proverbs 17:15</i>	
74. DO ALL THINGS WITHOUT GRUMBLING .....	202
<i>Meditation on Philippians 2:14–15</i>	
75. SAVING BABIES AND SAVING SINNERS .....	205
<i>Thoughts on the Horrors of Abortion and Hell</i>	
76. THE PRESENT POWER OF HEAVEN AND HELL .....	207
<i>Learning from Jesus to Hope and Fear</i>	
77. ON COURSE IN THE EVER-SIMILAR STORMS OF CHANGE .....	210
<i>The Values of Pondering the Past</i>	
78. HOW NOT TO COMMIT IDOLATRY IN GIVING THANKS .....	213
<i>Jonathan Edwards on True Thanksgiving</i>	
79. THE WONDERS OF PASTORAL “POLYGAMY” .....	215
<i>Reflections on Twenty-Eight Years of Marriage</i>	
80. FOUR WAYS GOD LEADS HIS PEOPLE .....	217
<i>Thoughts on How to Know God’s Will</i>	
81. CAN AN OMNISCIENT GOD BE SORRY FOR SOMETHING HE HAS DONE? .....	220
<i>Reflections on Genesis 6:5–7</i>	
82. BETTER IS A LITTLE WITH RIGHTEOUSNESS .....	223
<i>Thoughts on Having and Happiness</i>	
83. WHEN RIGHTS CONFLICT .....	226
<i>Why the Simple Right to Abortion Is Unjust</i>	

84. AN AMAZING (UNUSED?) MEANS OF CHANGE.....	228
<i>Considerations on the Power of Considering</i>	
85. STRONG MEAT FOR THE MUSCLE OF MISSIONS .....	230
<i>Thoughts on the Ministry of Adoniram Judson</i>	
86. O LORD, GIVE US CHILDREN OF PROMISE, NOT CHILDREN OF THE FLESH! .....	233
<i>Meditation on Romans 9:8</i>	
87. FIREWORKS AND A FULL MOON—A PARABLE .....	235
<i>Meditations from the Eleventh Avenue Curb</i>	
88. CONSEQUENCES OF FORGIVEN SIN.....	237
<i>When Pain Is Not a Penalty</i>	
89. LEGAL KILLING, ILLEGAL MAIMING .....	239
<i>Abominating Abortion</i>	
90. HOW DOES GOD GRADE AT THE JUDGMENT? .....	241
<i>Thoughts on Our Imperfect Obedience</i>	
91. WHY DID GOD CREATE FAMILIES?.....	243
<i>Pondering the Unveiling of God</i>	
92. DO YOU DELIGHT TO BE AFRAID? .....	246
<i>Meditation on Some Wonderful Words of Fear</i>	
93. HOW DO YOU OBEY THE COMMAND TO BE BORN? .....	249
<i>Reflections on Waking Up from the Dead</i>	
94. INSPIRED BY THE INCREDIBLE EARLY CHURCH .....	252
<i>Lord, Give Us a Holy Imitation</i>	
95. MATTHEW'S AMAZING WARNINGS NOT TO BE A FALSE DISCIPLE .....	255
<i>Thoughts on the Necessity for Practical Righteousness</i>	
96. THE PROBLEM OF PREEMIES .....	258
<i>An Open Letter to the Star Tribune</i>	
97. HOW EXILES SERVE THE CITY.....	260
<i>Living Well When God and Satan Claim the Earth</i>	
98. MOUNTAINS ARE NOT MEANT TO ENVY.....	263
<i>Awed Thoughts on Charles Spurgeon</i>	
99. WOULD YOU ACCEPT EXECUTION FOR BEING A CHRISTIAN? .....	266
<i>Martyrdom Is Modern Too</i>	

100. WHEN THOUSANDS DIE IN BANGLADESH .....	268
<i>Pondering Pain and the Power of God</i>	
101. BECAUSE HE IS OUR FATHER? OR, THAT WE MAY BE SONS? .....	271
<i>Meditation on Luke 6:35–36 and the Conditionality of Our Salvation</i>	
102. TEENAGE RESOLUTIONS IN HONOR OF MOM AND DAD .....	273
<i>What I Pray Our Teens Will Say</i>	
103. DOING WELL AND DOING BETTER.....	276
<i>Thoughts on the Space of Grace inside Perfection</i>	
104. ONE-ISSUE POLITICS, ONE-ISSUE MARRIAGE, AND THE HUMANE SOCIETY .....	279
<i>Pondering One-Issue Politics and Cruelty to Animals</i>	
105. LEARNING FROM A GREAT MAN TO ENJOY FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD .....	281
<i>Thoughts on Relating to the Trinity Personally</i>	
106. THE POWER OF A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE .....	284
<i>Memories of John G. Paton's Father</i>	
107. BEGIN BY BLOWING OUT ALL HIS LAMPS .....	287
<i>The Light in Samuel Rutherford's Prison</i>	
108. A MOTHER'S DAY WITHOUT NOËL .....	290
<i>On Obeying Proverbs 31:28</i>	
109. HAPPINESS IN BEING LOVED AND LOVING BY BEING HAPPY .....	292
<i>Thoughts on Leading with Joy and Praying for the Joy of Leaders</i>	
110. YOU ARE NOT ENSLAVED TO YOUR PAST.....	294
<i>Meditation on the Possibility of Change</i>	
111. REARING CHILDREN FOR THE WORLD'S END .....	297
<i>How Amy Carmichael Got That Way</i>	
112. WORDS OF HOPE FOR A BABY BORN BLIND .....	299
<i>A Letter to the Parents</i>	
113. RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S .....	301
<i>The Tension of Being Aliens and Heirs</i>	
114. BE INSPIRED BY ARISTEIDES .....	303
<i>How the Early Christians Loved</i>	

115. THE POWER OF GOD AND PRO-CHOICE REASONING .....	305
<i>Thoughts on a Prison Conversation</i>	
116. WHEN DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER? .....	307
<i>Meditation on 1 John 3:22–23</i>	
117. THE POWER OF BOOKS AND HOW TO USE THEM.....	310
<i>Thoughts on Reading to Each Other Out Loud</i>	
118. DOES THE ANCHOR OF MY SOUL DANGLE OUT OF HEAVEN? .....	312
<i>Meditation on Hebrews 6:18–20</i>	
119. THE GREAT “THEREFORE” OF THE RESURRECTION.....	315
<i>Pondering the Consequences of Ideas</i>	
120. ALL THE ANGELS ARE COMING WITH HIM.....	317
<i>Meditation on Matthew 25:31–46</i>	
DESIRING GOD MINISTRIES .....	320
NOTES .....	321
SUBJECT INDEX .....	325
PERSON INDEX.....	329
SCRIPTURE INDEX.....	331



Books don't change people; paragraphs do. Sometimes even sentences. I can still remember an afternoon in the fall of 1968 in a bookstore on Colorado Avenue in Pasadena, California, as I read the first page of *The Weight of Glory* by C. S. Lewis. Even if I had not read another page, my life would have been changed forever. I can probably boil it down to two sentences: "We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."<sup>1</sup> Almost thirty years later I still feel the shudder of discovery and the rush of light that passed through me. Nothing would ever be the same again. Just one paragraph and the decisive work was done.

This is not new. Sixteen hundred years earlier in August of 386, Saint Augustine was in spiritual turmoil. In a garden in Milan, Italy, he flung himself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which streamed from his eyes. "I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees." Then he heard "the sing-song voice of a boy or a girl, I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, 'Take it and read, take it and read.'" Augustine took this as a "divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall." He opened and read, "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites." In two sentences the knot was cut. "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."<sup>2</sup>

For Luther it was another one of Saint Paul's great sentences, Romans 1:16–17. For Jonathan Edwards it was 1 Timothy 1:17. For John Wesley it was the Preface to Luther's *Commentary on Romans*. And the list could go on. The point is that much reading of many books may be like the gathering of wood, but the fire blazes forth from a sentence. The mark is left on the mind not by the kindling of many pages, but by the red-hot iron of a sentence set on fire by God.

My prayer is that God might be pleased to take the short readings of this book and set a sentence or a paragraph on fire in your mind. The readings are only two or three pages long. They are not arranged in any topical order. What holds them together is a quest to savor the supremacy of God in all of life. Awakening and feeding that hunger is my aim.

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S



**T**hanks to Noël for reading and rereading these pages. I love being married to an editor who sees the flaw but savors the vision. Thanks to Steve Halliday for nursing my ten-year pregnancy with this idea and for your final midwifery. Thanks to Carol Steinbach who could, I think, do indexes in her sleep but still stays up late and meets merciless deadlines.

As I complete this book, David and Karin Livingston and Brad and Cindy Nelson complete ten years with me on the pastoral team at Bethlehem Baptist Church. Last year David and Sally Michael passed the same milestone. With overflowing gratitude to God, I dedicate *A Godward Life* to these patient partners in the Great Work.

David and Karin, thank you for twenty-three years of unwavering friendship, countless acts of Godward hospitality, relentless love for lost people, and ten years of ungrudging flexibility in burden-bearing love for all the saints. David and Sally, thank you for giving yourselves to the inner city before any of us dreamed that dream, and for bleeding Bible when you are pricked, and for knowing the difference between man-centered moralizing and God-centered meaning in the ministry of the Word to our children. Brad and Cindy, thank you for one of the rarest triumphs—ten years of faithful God-exalting ministry to teenagers—and for standing strong when the thanks were few, for weaving world missions into all your dreams, for building Bible and worship and witness into the lives of our youth, and for shepherding my four sons toward a passion for the supremacy of God.

I love you and the church we joyfully serve.



# THE TEACHER, THE BIBLE, AND A GODWARD LIFE

I admit that it seems like a contradiction. I am tempting you to read something other than the Bible, namely, the book in your hands. Yet the point of this book is that reading the Bible itself is what really counts. I love the words of John Wesley: “I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God. I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book! At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book.”<sup>1</sup> That book is the Bible, the precious Word of God. Only there do we find the way to heaven. Only there do we learn a Godward life.

But is it a contradiction? It would be but for one thing: The Bible itself tells us that God calls human teachers to explain and apply his Book. Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul were called “teachers” in the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:28, “God has appointed in the church...teachers.” In Ephesians 4:11 he says, “[Christ’s] gifts were that some should be...teachers” (RSV). We also know from 1 Timothy 3:2 that overseers of the church are to be “able to teach.” Therefore, human teachers are God’s design for his people. Their job is to explain and apply the Bible so that people can understand it, believe it, and live it.

Some of these teachers write. I cannot speak for others, but for myself it is simply a matter of necessity. I cannot get clear what I think until I try to write it down. It is a fruitful infirmity. I am no John Calvin or Saint

Augustine, but I do say with them, “I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write.”<sup>2</sup>

But no matter how much we learn or say, teachers are not the Bible. We all see “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). “Let not many of you become teachers,” James warns, “...For we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:1–2). It is sad but true that many ordinary Christians can say with the psalmist, “I have more insight than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation” (Psalm 119:99). It is the testimony of the Lord, not the teaching of man, that makes “wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7). Lots of teachers speak little Bible, but their words are like grass. “The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the LORD abides forever” (1 Peter 1:24–25).

Teaching that lasts—and books that last—will be the kind that “bleed Bible.” C. H. Spurgeon said of John Bunyan, “Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God.”<sup>3</sup> God wills that there be human teachers of his divine Word, but he wills that teachers be “full of the Word of God.” The Bible should “flow from them.” Their blood—and their books—should be “Bibline.”

Teaching is not the only gift in the church. The teaching mouth cannot say to the touching hand or the running foot, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21). There is a reciprocity: “Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches” (Galatians 6:6, RSV). That doesn’t just mean “pay your preacher.” It also means that the ones teaching need all the “good things” that the ones being taught are and do. I could not survive without the echo of truth in the love of my people.

This book is the overflow of my calling as a teacher in the church. For more than seventeen years I have preached to the flock at Bethlehem Baptist Church. But there is so much more to say than a preacher can say on Sundays and Wednesdays. The Bible is an inexhaustible spring of insight

into God and his ways. So for those same seventeen years, I have written a letter to my people about once a week in what we affectionately call the *Star*. What you have in your hands is a collection of some of those meditations.

They are, by design, almost entirely meditations on Scripture. Some focus on personal or social application. Others focus on biblical explanation. In both cases the aim is to be implicitly and explicitly biblical. That is their only claim to abiding usefulness in life. Many of the weekly letters have vanished in the merciful forgetfulness of history. Others are too limited in focus to be of interest beyond our church. (Who would want to hear about our budget shortfall every December?) Yet I believe some of them have enough abiding relevance and biblical rootedness to magnify Christ beyond one church and one decade. Whether that is true, time will tell.

One of the great things about being at a church for seventeen years is that the mission of the church and the mission of the preacher tend to become one. This is true at Bethlehem. We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. That is our church mission. It is also my life's mission. I try to measure all my speaking and writing and living by this standard: Does it spread a passion for the supremacy of God?

So, if there is a thread that holds these meditations together, it is the relentless aim of my life to savor the supremacy of God in all things. Hence the subtitle of this book. "Savoring" is the right word. The supremacy of God is not a mere idea. It is not even a mere magnificent fact. It is a sweet reality. God means not only to be seen as supreme, but also savored. "O taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Psalm 34:8, RSV). The supremacy of God's goodness and holiness and power and knowledge and justice and wisdom are honey for the heart's tongue and gold for the treasury of our soul. God means for us to know them with our minds and relish them with our hearts.

I feel about the supremacy of God the way Jonathan Edwards felt about the sovereignty of God: "God's absolute sovereignty...is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes....

The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. . . . God's sovereignty has ever appeared to me, [a] great part of his glory. It has often been my delight to approach God, and adore him as a sovereign God."<sup>4</sup>

This savoring is a deep and delightful duty. The Bible says, "Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; and let those who love Your salvation say continually, 'Let God be magnified'" (Psalm 70:4). In fact, these two things—being glad in God and magnifying God—are not separate things. The banner over every meditation in this book is the conviction that God is most magnified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

When the psalmist says, "I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God" (Psalm 43:4, RSV), he means that the extent of his joy is part of what makes his praise authentic. The supremacy of God's beauty and all-satisfying value is the final food for the savoring of our souls, not his gifts. There is no other way to account for words like these:

*Though the fig tree do not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation.  
(Habakkuk 3:17–18, RSV)*

Only one thing accounts for the words of Paul when he said, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8)—Christ, the essence and image of God, is more to be desired than all his gifts. He is the end of our soul's savoring, not the means.

The gifts of God are good. They are to be received with thanks and joy,

but they are not God, nor are they the soul's final food. They point away from themselves to God. "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1, RSV), and so is every other gift that we enjoy. Again and again I go back to Augustine's prayer to get my bearings: "He loves Thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake."<sup>5</sup> In these meditations I rejoice in many gifts of God, but I will have failed in my aim if the overall impact of this book does not move us from seeking his gifts to savoring himself.

A Godward life is a life lived for the sake of seeing and savoring and showing God in all things. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31, RSV), and the glory is most fully manifest when its all-satisfying sweetness frees us to suffer—even joyfully—for the sake of his name. "They went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

A Godward life is lived with a constant view to the reward of eternal fellowship with God. This Godward hope is the power that unleashes sacrificial love (Colossians 1:4–5) in a restless world that wants it all now. "When you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13–14). They look to the reward of God's fellowship and they love. This is a Godward life. "You showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one" (Hebrews 10:34). They looked to the reward of God's fellowship and loved. This is a Godward life.

The only hope that such a reward could be inherited by sinners like us is the death of Christ in our place. "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Christ died in our place so that sinners might feast on the holiness of God

without being destroyed. This is our only hope. The just died for the unjust. Without this, a Godward life would be impossible and, if possible, suicidal. Until the wrath of God is averted from my sinful soul by the death of Christ, God is a consuming fire. Afterward, by faith, he is the light of life and the end of all my desires. This is the final testimony of a Godward life:

*Whom have I in heaven but thee?  
And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.  
(Psalm 73:25–26, RSV)*

# Loving God for Who HE Is



*A Pastor's Perspective*

One of the most important discoveries I have ever made is this truth: God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him. This is the motor that drives my ministry as a pastor. It affects everything I do.

Whether I eat or drink or preach or counsel or whatever I do, my aim is to glorify God by the way I do it (1 Corinthians 10:31). This means my aim is to do it in a way that shows how the glory of God has satisfied the longings of my heart. If my preaching betrayed that God had not even met my own needs, it would be fraudulent. If Christ were not the satisfaction of my heart, would people really believe me when I herald his words, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35, RSV)?

The glory of bread is that it satisfies. The glory of living water is that it quenches thirst. We do not honor the refreshing, self-replenishing, pure water of a mountain spring by lugging buckets of water up the path to make our contributions from the ponds below. We honor the spring by feeling thirsty, getting down on our knees, and drinking with joy. Then we say, “Ahhhh!” (that’s worship!), and we go on our journey in the strength of the fountain (that’s service). The mountain spring is glorified most when we are most satisfied with its water.

Tragically, most of us have been taught that duty, not delight, is the

way to glorify God. We have not been taught that delight in God is our duty! Being satisfied in God is not an optional add-on to the real stuff of Christian duty. It is the most basic demand of all. “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Psalm 37:4) is not a suggestion, but a command. So are: “Serve the LORD with gladness” (Psalm 100:2), and, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

The burden of my ministry is to make plain to others that the “steadfast love [of the Lord] is better than life” (Psalm 63:3, RSV). If it is better than life, it is better than all that life in this world offers. This means that what satisfies are not the gifts of God, but the glory of God—the glory of his love, the glory of his power, the glory of his wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

This is why the psalmist Asaph cried out, “Whom have I in heaven but you? Besides you I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” (Psalm 73:25–26). Nothing on the earth—none of God’s good gifts of creation—could satisfy Asaph’s heart. Only God could. This is what David meant when he said to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good besides you” (Psalm 16:2).

David and Asaph teach us by their own God-centered longings that God’s gifts of health, wealth, and prosperity do not satisfy. Only God does. It would be presumptuous not to thank him for his gifts (“Forget not all his benefits” [Psalm 103:2, RSV]), but it would be idolatry to call the gladness we get from them, love for God. When David said to the Lord, “In your presence is fullness of joy, in your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Psalm 16:11), he meant that nearness to God himself is the only all-satisfying experience of the universe.

It is not for God’s gifts that David yearns like a heartsick lover. “As a deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1–2). What David wants to experience is a revelation of the power and the glory of God: “O God, you

are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory” (Psalm 63:1–2, NRSV). Only God will satisfy a heart like David’s, and David was a man after God’s own heart. That’s the way we were created to be.

This is the essence of what it means to love God—to be satisfied in him. In him! Loving God may include obeying all his commands; it may include believing all his Word; it may include thanking him for all his gifts; but the essence of loving God is enjoying all he is. It is this enjoyment of God that glorifies his worth most fully, especially when all around our soul gives way.

We all know this intuitively as well as from Scripture. Do we feel most honored by the love of those who serve us from the constraints of duty, or from the delights of fellowship? My wife is most honored when I say, “It makes me happy to spend time with you.” My happiness is the echo of her excellence. So it is with God. He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

None of us has arrived at perfect satisfaction in God. I grieve often over the murmuring of my heart at the loss of worldly comforts, but I have tasted that the Lord is good. By God’s grace I now know the fountain of everlasting joy, and so I love to spend my days luring people into joy until they say with me, “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” (Psalm 27:4, RSV). ☺

# TODAY'S MERCIES FOR TODAY'S TROUBLES



*Meditation on Matthew 6:34*

*Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.*

*Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (author's translation)*

Part of saving faith is the assurance that you will have faith tomorrow. Trusting Christ today includes trusting him to give you tomorrow's trust when tomorrow comes. Often we feel today like our reservoir of strength is not going to last for another day. The fact is, it won't. Today's resources are for today, and part of those resources is the confidence that new resources will be given tomorrow.

The basis of this assurance is the wonderful teaching of the Bible that God assigns only as much trouble to each day as that day can bear. God will not let his children be tested in any given day beyond what his mercy for that day will sustain. That's what Paul means when he says, "No test has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able, but with the test will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13, author's translation).

The old Swedish hymn "Day by Day" is based on Deuteronomy 33:25: "As your days, so shall your strength be." It gives us the same assurance:

*Day by day, and with each passing moment,  
strength I find to meet my trials here;  
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,  
I've no cause for worry or for fear.*

The “Father’s wise bestowment” is the amount of trouble that we can bear each day—and no more:

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

With every day’s measure of pain, he gives new mercies. This is the point of Lamentations 3:22–23, “The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

God’s mercies are new every morning because each day has enough mercy in it only for that day. This is why we tend to despair when we think that we may have to bear tomorrow’s load on today’s resources. God wants us to know that we won’t. Today’s mercies are for today’s troubles. Tomorrow’s mercies are for tomorrow’s troubles.

Sometimes we wonder if we will have the mercy to stand in terrible testing. Yes, we will. Peter says, “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Peter 4:14). When the reviling comes, the Spirit of glory comes. It happened for Stephen as he was being stoned (Acts 7:55–60). It will happen for you. When the Spirit and the glory are needed, they will come.

The manna in the wilderness was given one day at a time. There was no storing up. That is the way we must depend on God’s mercy. You do not receive today the strength to bear tomorrow’s burdens. You are given mercies today for today’s troubles. Tomorrow the mercies will be new. “God is

faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9, RSV). "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will act!" (1 Thessalonians 5:24, author's translation). 🐦

# GOD WAS UP ALL NIGHT



## *Meditation on Psalm 121:3*

*He will not let your foot be moved,  
he who keeps you will not slumber. (RSV)*

**T**he worship team and prayer teams gathered around me and prayed for me before I preached. Our worship leader remarked that God was up all night working on this service and the people who would be there—including me. He thanked the Lord for this and praised him for his unwearying work on our behalf.

O what a truth this is! For every Christian. Let me encourage you with it. Psalm 121:2–3 says it plainly: “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber.” The one who helps you never sleeps. He stays up all night, every night.

Do you need help? I do. Where do you look for help? When the psalmist lifted up his eyes to the hills and asked, “From where does my help come?” he answered, “My help comes from the Lord”—not from the hills, but from the God who made the hills. So he reminded himself of two great truths: One is that God is a mighty Creator over all the problems of life; the other is that God never sleeps.

God is a tireless worker. Think of God as a worker in your life. Yes, it is amazing. We are prone to think of ourselves as workers in God’s life. But the Bible wants us first to be amazed that God is a worker in our lives: “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a

God besides thee, who works for those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4, RSV).

God is working for us around the clock. He does not take days off, and he does not sleep. In fact, he is so eager to work for us that he goes around looking for more work to do for people who will trust him: "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of those whose heart is whole toward him" (2 Chronicles 16:9, RSV).

God loves to show his tireless power and wisdom and goodness by working for people who trust him. Jesus himself is the clearest revelation of this truth: "The Son of man also came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45, RSV). Jesus works for his followers. He serves them. This is a revelation of the way God is.

He worked for us when he was on the earth, and he keeps on working now that he is risen and reigning with the Father in heaven. Paul experienced this in a powerful way: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed" (Romans 15:18, RSV). Christ worked for Paul all his life. At the very end of his life, in his last letter, he said, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully" (2 Timothy 4:17, RSV). Through all his life Paul could say, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, RSV). Jesus is the great worker, the great strength-giver.

The eagerness of God to work for us is astonishing. His eyes are running to and fro, looking for opportunities to work for people who trust him (2 Chronicles 16:9). He is pursuing us with goodness and mercy all our days (Psalm 23:6, literally "pursue" not just "follow"). He is not just waiting for us to get his help; he is seeking ways to give us help. He is doing this with overflowing eagerness. "I will not turn away from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and all my soul" (Jeremiah 32:40–41, RSV).

No wonder he stays up all night! With all his heart and with all his soul he works for those who wait for him and trust him. This is what we must believe—really believe—in order to rejoice always (Philippians 4:4) and give thanks for everything (Ephesians 5:20) and have the peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7) and be anxious for nothing (Philippians 4:6) and hate our lives in this world (John 12:25) and love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39).

What a truth! What a reality! God is up all night and all day to work for those who wait for him. 🐦