

JOHN PIPER

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BY GOD

TEN TRUTHS TO TURN *the* WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

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(This book originally appeared under the title *Doctrine Matters*.)

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Post Office Box 2901
Minneapolis, MN 55402

Published for Desiring God by

CruciformPress

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Print/PDF 978-1-941114-55-1
Mobipocket 978-1-941114-56-8
ePub 978-1-941114-57-5

Printed in the United States of America

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Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible

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Preface

I wonder if you associate the words *astonishment* and *compassion* with the word *doctrine*? I do. And not only those words, but also *joy* and *life* and *hope*.

Doctrine simply means “teaching.” It has come to refer to groups of teachings, usually held by a religious group, but every place *doctrine* occurs in the Bible it simply translates the ordinary word for teaching.

So, when Jesus saw the crowds who were “like sheep without a shepherd,” Mark tells us that he had compassion on them and “began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). Jesus’s compassion elicits teaching—doctrine.

This is what Jesus did more than anything else: he taught. “Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching” (Matthew 9:35). And usually the response was astonishment. “When the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching” (Matthew 22:33). Astonishment is elicited by Jesus’s teaching—doctrine.

It is simply amazing the way the apostle John connects doctrine with our relationship to God. He says, “Everyone who does not abide in the *doctrine* of Christ, *does not have God*. Whoever abides in the *doctrine* has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 1:9). If we tenaciously treasure true teaching from Jesus, we have God. Amazing.

Not surprisingly, then, Jesus tells us that his teaching is for our “joy” (John 15:11) and our “life” (John 6:68). And the apostle Paul said that all the doctrine of the Bible is for our “hope” (Romans 15:4).

So, when I was coming to the end of my 33 years as pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, it seemed good to look back over the decades and distill the doctrines—the astonishing, compassionate, life-giving, joy-awakening, hope-sustaining teachings—that held everything together.

That is what I did in my final sermons at the church. I think of them as legacy messages. What were the main truths I wanted to leave ringing in my peoples’ ears? I ended up with ten of them, ten truths that have turned my world upside down, and turned our church upside down, and will continue to turn the whole world upside down as the gospel advances by the power of God. In this book, I want to walk you through those ten truths, much as I did in those final sermons at Bethlehem. Indeed, this book is a summary of the main things I tried to impart during those 33 years.

But it would be a mistake to read this book in a nostalgic mood. These messages are future-oriented. They are for living life today and tomorrow. I explain in chapter one that the aim was not to *land* the plane after a 33-year flight at Bethlehem, but to *launch* two new seasons of life—

theirs and mine. Because these doctrines are, as you will soon read, “wildly untamable, explosively uncontainable, and electrically future-creating.”

Every day is the launch of the rest of your life. You are not bound by your past. Not if you turn to Jesus and believe his teaching. Not if you are astonished by God. Instead, you will know the truth—the doctrine—and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).

John Piper
Minneapolis, Minnesota
March 2018

EXODUS 3:13-15

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

1 God Is

My ultimate goal in the ten chapters of this book is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. In other words, I aim to make so much of God the Father, and God the Son, through God the Spirit, that you will be moved to join me in glad adoration of our triune God.

Under that overarching aim, my goal is to awaken and strengthen a powerful conviction in you as you read. When I delivered these messages to Bethlehem Baptist Church at the conclusion of my 33 years of ministry there, I wanted the people to see them as preparation, not consummation. Or to put it another way, I hoped to help them see and feel that my transition away from being pastor was, for the church and for me, less about landing and more about launching. It was less about the great things God *had* done, and more about the greater things God is going to do.

Therefore it seemed good to me, with the encouragement of Bethlehem's pastoral staff, to turn the church's attention to a battery of foundational realities—defining truths, thirty-year trademarks, biblical touchstones—that had profoundly shaped what that church had been for the previous three decades.

Today, just as strongly as when I delivered those messages, I still see the summary of foundational, world-changing truths in this book more like a launch than a land. They lead us to pursue preparation rather than ponder consummation, to lay hold on the greater things to come rather than linger over the great things of the past.

The reason is that these foundational realities, expounded in each chapter, are wildly untamable, explosively uncontrollable, and electrically future-creating. They don't just sustain the present and explain the past—they are living and active and supernaturally supercharged to take God's people to places we have not yet dreamed, in ways we have not yet dreamed.

And so we turn to this battery of foundational realities—these defining truths, these 30-year trademarks, these biblical touchstones—truths that have not merely shaped one church, but have turned the world upside down since the first days of Christianity, are still doing so today, and will continue to do so until Christ returns. We turn to wildly untamable, explosively uncontrollable, electrically future-creating realities. We turn to be astonished by God.

God Absolutely Is

The first of these truths is that *God is*. Or to say it after the way our text puts it, *God is who he is*. Or to say it more

philosophically, *God absolutely is*. This is the most basic fact and the most ultimate fact. Period. Of the billions of facts that there are, this one is at the bottom and at the top. It is the foundation of all others and the consummation of all others. Nothing is more basic and nothing is more ultimate than the fact that *God is*.

Nothing is more foundational than that *God is*. Nothing is more foundational to your life or your marriage or your job or your health or your mind or your future than that *God is*. Nothing is more foundational to the world, or the solar system, or the Milky Way, or the universe than that *God is*. And nothing is more foundational to the Bible, and the self-revelation of God, and the glory of the gospel of Jesus than that *God is*.

The reality that *God absolutely is* stands as the point of Exodus 3:13–15. Let me set the stage for you. For several centuries the people of Israel—God’s chosen people—have lived as aliens in Egypt. And for a long time they have been treated as slaves. Now, as the time of God’s deliverance is drawing near, a Jewish child is born, who will be given the name Moses. He is providentially rescued from an edict of death by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in the royal court. As an adult, while defending one of his kinsmen, he kills an Egyptian and then flees to the land of Midian. There, God appears to him in a burning bush.

He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.⁷ Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because

of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:6-10)

So Moses is chosen by God to lead his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land, but he shrinks back, as well might anyone. “But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’” (v. 11). And God said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (v. 12).

And then Moses brings us to one of the most important things God ever said.

Three Things God Says about Himself

Let’s take another look at our text.

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me,

‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD [Hebrew: “Yahweh”], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever [Yahweh], and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exodus 3:13–15)

You ask me my name, God says, so I will tell you three things. First, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’” (v. 14a). He did not say that was his name. He said, in effect, “Before you worry about my name, or where I line up among the many gods of Egypt or Babylon or Philistia, and before you wonder about conjuring me with my name, and even before you wonder if I Am the God of Abraham, be stunned by this: *I Am Who I Am*. I absolutely am. Before you get my name, get my being.”

That “I Am Who I Am”—that *I absolutely Am*—is first, foundational, and of infinite importance.

Second, “And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (v. 14b). Notice that God is still not telling Moses his name. He is building a bridge between his being and his name, by putting the statement of his being in the place of his name. Say, “I Am has sent me to you.” The one who is—who absolutely is—sent me to you.

Third, “God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: “The LORD [Hebrew: “Yahweh”], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and

the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This [Yahweh] is my name forever.” (v. 15). Finally, he gives us his name. It’s almost always translated LORD in the English Bible. But the Hebrew would be pronounced something like “Yahweh,” and is built on the word for “I Am.” So every time you hear the word Yahweh (or the short form Yah—which you hear every time you sing “hallelu-jah” (“praise Yahweh”))—every time you see LORD in the English Bible, with those distinctive small capital letters, you should think: *this is a proper name (like Jason or Melissa) built out of the word for “I Am” and reminding us that God absolutely is.*

God absolutely is. This is amazing. God gave himself a name (used more than four thousand times in the Old Testament) that presses us, when we hear it, to think, *he is. He absolutely is. He is absolute.*

This is the first of the wildly untamable, explosively uncontrollable, electrically future-creating realities we will discuss. A people who are stunned and astonished that *God is* will be an irrepressible people. Our triune God loves to show up in gracious power where people are blown away by the fact that he is.

Ten Things It Means for God to Be Who He Is

What does it mean for God to be who he is? Here are ten points:

1. *God’s absolute being means he never had a beginning.*
This staggers the mind. Every child asks, “Who made God?” And every wise parent says, “Nobody made God. God simply is. And always was. No beginning.”

2. *God's absolute being means God will never end.* If he did not come into being, he cannot go out of being, because he *is* being. He is what is. There is no place to go outside of being. There is only he. Before he creates, that's all that is: God.
3. *God's absolute being means God is absolute reality.* There is no reality before him. There is no reality outside of him unless he wills it and makes it. Before he creates, he is not one of many realities. He is simply there as absolute reality. He is all that was eternally. No space, no universe, no emptiness. Only God. Absolutely there. Absolutely all.
4. *God's absolute being means that God is utterly independent.* He depends on nothing to bring him into being or support him or counsel him or make him what he is. That is what *absolute being* means.
5. *God's absolute being means that everything that is not God depends totally on God.* All that is not God is secondary and dependent. The entire universe is utterly secondary. Not primary. It came into being by God and stays in being moment-by-moment on God's decision to keep it in being.
6. *God's absolute being means all the universe is, by comparison to God, as nothing.* Contingent, dependent reality is to absolute, independent reality as a shadow to substance. As an echo to a thunderclap. As a bubble to the ocean. All that we see, all that we are amazed by in the world and in the galaxies is, compared to God, as nothing. "All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness" (Isaiah 40:17).
7. *God's absolute being means that God is constant.* He is

the same yesterday, today, and forever. He cannot be improved. He is not becoming anything. He is who he is. There is no development in God. No progress. Absolute perfection cannot be improved upon.

8. *God's absolute being means that he is the absolute standard of truth and goodness and beauty.* There is no law book to which he looks to know what is right. No almanac to consult to establish facts. No guild to inquire of to determine what is excellent or beautiful. He himself is the standard of what is right, what is true, what is beautiful.
9. *God's absolute being means God does whatever he pleases and it is always right and always beautiful and always in accord with truth.* There are no constraints on him from outside him that could hinder him in doing anything he pleases. All reality that is outside of him he created and designed and governs as the absolute reality. So he is utterly free from any constraints that don't originate from the counsel of his own will.
10. *God's absolute being means that he is the most important and most valuable reality and the most important and most valuable person in the universe.* He is more worthy of interest and attention and admiration and enjoyment than all other realities, including the entire universe.

Because He Is

God absolutely is! Let us believe and cherish this. God is. It is a wildly untamable, explosively uncontainable, electrically future-creating reality—that God is. And it is a cosmic outrage billions of times over that he is ignored,

treated as negligible, questioned, criticized, and given less consideration than the carpet in people's homes.

With God being the most significant reality, nothing is rightly known apart from its relationship to him. He is the source and goal and definer of all beings and all things. Let us, therefore, be a God-besotted people. To know him, to admire him, to make him known as glorious should be our driving passion. Let him be simply and overwhelmingly dominant in our consciousness. If we exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God, then everything must start and end with him, everything must be related to him.

Therefore, God helping us, we will not blaspheme him. We will not blaspheme the God who absolutely is by taking him for granted, or making him peripheral, or calling him the assumed foundation of all the things while it's actually the "things" we are most excited about. Let us dread ever falling under the criticism of Albert Einstein that Charles Misner wrote about twenty years ago.

I do see the design of the universe as essentially a religious question. That is, one should have some kind of respect and awe for the whole business... . It's very magnificent and shouldn't be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion, although he strikes me as a basically very religious man. He must have looked at what the preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not talking about the real thing. (Quoted in *First Things*, Dec. 1991, No. 18, 63)

When I first read that quote I thought, *O God, never, never let that happen at our church!* I knew then, and I know now, that billions of people in the world are starving to know the true and living God who absolutely is. And we, who have the good news, know that this God has sent his Son into the world to die for God-belittling sinners like us, so that whoever believes in Jesus Christ may know this God, with joy, forever. So let us be fully aware of our calling as Christians. We exist to spread a passion for God who absolutely is.

You see, then, why I call this an untamable, uncontrollable, electrically future-creating reality. “I Am Who I Am,” he declares, now and forever. God absolutely is.

More about the God Who Is

GOD, GLORY, GOSPEL

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. —Isaiah 6:1–4

Glimpse with me seven glorious truths about God in these four verses. And all of them follow from the fact that *God is*.

God Is Alive

In the year that King Uzziah died...

Just as God *is*, he is *alive*. Uzziah is dead, but God lives on. “From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Psalm 90:2). God was the living God when this universe banged into existence. He was the living God when Socrates drank his poison. He was the living God when William Bradford governed Plymouth Colony. He was the living God in 1966 when Thomas Altizer proclaimed him dead and *Time* magazine put it on the front cover. And he will be the living God ten trillion ages from now when all the puny potshots against his reality will have sunk into oblivion like BBs at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the LORD.” There is not a single head of state in all the world who will be there in fifty years. The turnover in world leadership is 100 percent. But not God. He never had a beginning and therefore depends on nothing for his existence. He always has been and always will be alive.

God Is Authoritative

I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne.

No vision of heaven has ever caught a glimpse of God plowing a field or cutting his grass or shining his shoes or filling out reports or loading a truck. Heaven is not coming apart at the seams by inattention. God is never at wit's end with his heavenly realm. He sits. And he sits on a *throne*. All is at peace and he has control.

The throne is his right to rule the world. We do not *give* God authority over our lives. He has it whether we like it or not. What utter folly it is to act as though we had

any rights at all to call God into question! We need to hear, now and then, blunt words like those of Virginia Stem Owens who said in the *Reformed Journal*:

Let us get this one thing straight. God can do anything he damn well pleases, including damn well. And if it pleases him to damn, then it is done, ipso facto, well. God's activity is what it is. There isn't anything else. Without it there would be no being, including human beings presuming to judge the Creator of everything that is.

Few things are more humbling, and few things give us that sense of raw majesty, than the truth that God is utterly authoritative. He is the Supreme Court, the Legislature, and the Chief Executive. After him, there is no appeal.

God Is Omnipotent

I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne high and lifted up.

The throne of God's authority is not one throne among many. It is high and lifted up. That God's throne is higher than every other throne signifies God's superior power to exercise his authority. No opposing authority can nullify the decrees of God. What he purposes, he accomplishes. "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isaiah 46:10).

"He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand" (Daniel 4:35). And this sovereign authority of the living God is a refuge full of joy and power for those who keep his covenant.

God Is Resplendent

I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

You have seen pictures of brides whose dresses are gathered around them, covering the steps and the platform. What would the meaning be if the train filled the aisles and covered the seats and the choir loft, woven all of one piece? That God's robe fills the entire heavenly temple means that he is a God of incomparable splendor. The fullness of God's splendor shows itself in a thousand ways.

There are species of fish that live deep in the dark sea and have their own built-in lights—some have lamps hanging from their chins, some have luminescent noses, some have beacons under their eyes. There are a thousand kinds of these self-lighted fish living deep in the ocean where none of us can see and marvel. They are spectacularly weird and beautiful. Why are they there? And why not just a dozen or so efficient, streamlined models? Because God is lavish in splendor. His creative fullness spills over in excessive beauty. And if that's the way the world is, how much more resplendent must be the Lord who thought it up and made it!

God Is Revered

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

No one knows what these strange six-winged creatures with feet and eyes and intelligence are. They never appear again in the Bible, at least not under the name seraphim. Given the grandeur of the scene and the power of the

angelic hosts, we had best not picture chubby, winged babies fluttering about God's ears. According to verse 4, when one of these beings speak, the foundations of the temple shake. We would do a little better to think of those thundering aerobatic fighter jets, the Blue Angels, diving in formation before a presidential entourage and cracking the sound barrier just as they pass by. There are no puny or silly creatures in heaven. Only magnificent ones.

And the point is that not even the seraphim can look upon the Lord, nor do they feel worthy even to leave their feet exposed in his presence. Great and good as they are, untainted by sin or the fall, they revere their Maker in great humility. An angel terrifies a man with his brilliance and power. But angels themselves hide in holy fear and reverence from the splendor of God. He is continually revered.

God Is Holy

And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!"

Language is pushing the limits of its usefulness here, and the effort to define the holiness of God ultimately winds up by saying that "God is holy" simply means "God is God." Let me illustrate.

The root meaning of holy is probably to *cut* or *separate*. A holy thing is something cut off and separated from common (we might say secular) use. Earthly things and persons are holy insofar as they are distinct from the world and devoted to God. So the Bible speaks of holy ground (Exodus 3:5), holy assemblies (Exodus 12:16), holy sabbaths (Exodus 16:23), a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), holy garments (Exodus 28:2), a holy city (Nehemiah 11:1), holy promises (Psalm 105:42), holy men (2 Peter 1:21) and women (1

Peter 3:5), holy Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15), holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8), a holy kiss (Romans 16:16), and a holy faith (Jude 20). Almost anything can become holy if it is separated from the common and devoted to God.

But notice what happens when this definition is applied to God himself. From what can you separate God to make him holy? The very God-ness of God means he is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. God is one-of-a-kind, *sui generis*, in a class by himself. In that sense he is utterly holy. But then you have said no more than that he is God!

Or if the holiness of a man derives from being separated from the world and devoted to God, to whom is God devoted so as to derive his holiness? To no one but himself. It is blasphemy to say that there is a higher reality than God to which he must conform in order to be holy. God is the absolute reality beyond which is only more of God. As we have seen, when asked for his name in Exodus 3:14, he said, "I AM WHO I AM." His being and his character are utterly undetermined by anything outside himself. He is not holy because he keeps the rules. He wrote the rules! God is not holy because he keeps the law. The law is holy because it reveals God. God is absolute. Everything else is derivative.

What then is his holiness? It is his infinite worth. His holiness is his utterly unique divine essence, which in his uniqueness has infinite value. It determines all that he is and does and is determined by no one. His holiness is what he is as God, which no one else is or ever will be. Call it his majesty, his divinity, his greatness, his value as the pearl of great price.

In the end, language runs out. In the word *holy* we have sailed to the world's end in the utter silence of reverence and wonder and awe. There may yet be more to know of God, but that will be beyond words. "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

God Is Glorious

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!

But before the silence and the shaking of the foundations and the all-concealing smoke, we learn a seventh and final thing about God—he is glorious.

The glory of God is the manifestation of his holiness. God's holiness is the incomparable perfection of his divine nature; his glory is the display of that holiness. "God is glorious" means God's holiness has gone public. His glory is the open revelation of the secret of his holiness. When God shows himself to be holy, what we see is glory. The holiness of God is his concealed glory. The glory of God is his revealed holiness.

Connections between God and the Gospel

Now, what does all this—about a living, authoritative, omnipotent, resplendent, revered, holy, glorious God—have to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ, incarnate as the God-man, crucified and risen from the dead at the center of history? John, in chapter 12 of his gospel, makes the connections for us more clearly than anyone. Let's look at four of these connections very briefly.

First, in Isaiah 6:1–4, as we have just seen, Isaiah presents God on his throne. In verses 9–10, however, it says

that this message of a glorious God will harden the people. They do not want a God of such majesty. Nevertheless, the chapter ends with a reference to a stump of faithfulness that remains, and Isaiah speaks of a “holy seed” (v. 13).

Then, in Isaiah 53, that seed is described as the suffering servant who had “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:2–3).

So in Isaiah 6 we have majesty, authority, and power. But Isaiah 53 presents just the opposite—no majesty, no beauty, nothing desirable, just misery. Yet *both messages are rejected*: “Who has believed what he has heard from us?” (Isaiah 53:1). Whether glorious and sovereign, or humble and suffering, the result is the same: man rejects God.

Now, notice that the two Isaiah verses (53:1 and 6:10) are the very two texts that John quotes in reference to *the rejection of Jesus* (see John 12:38 and 40). Why these texts? John tells us, “Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him” (John 12:41).

In other words, Jesus was the fulfillment of both Isaiah passages—he was the enthroned Sovereign *and* the suffering servant. “And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), and that glory was the unprecedented mingling of the majesty of Isaiah 6 and the misery of Isaiah 53. “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11).

Why? Why was this incomparable Christ rejected? Again, John answers our question. The people “loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:43). Because they loved human glory more than divine glory, they rejected Jesus—the

embodiment of the glory of God, both in his greatness as God and his lowliness as the suffering servant.

All this was part of God's design. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). His rejection was the plan. Because his death for sinners was the plan.

Does God then abandon his people Israel because they rejected him? No. That too is part of the plan. "A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25–26). Or as Romans 11:31 says, "So they [Israel] too has been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you Gentiles they also may now receive mercy."

Nothing has been wasted. There were no detours on the way to this great salvation of all God's elect. So when Paul stands back and looks at the whole plan, he worships.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "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 forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33–36)

This is our God.

ISAIAH 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

2

The Glory of God

After asking in chapter 1, “Who is God and what is his name?”—to which God answers, “I Am”—we find our next wildly untamable, explosively uncontainable, electrically future-creating reality in answer to the question, “Why did God create the world?”

The short answer, which resounds through the whole Bible like rolling thunder, is that *God created the world for his glory*. We’ll talk in a moment about what that means, but let’s establish the fact first.

Notice the key verses in Isaiah 43:6–7, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom *I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made.” Even if the narrowest meaning here is, “I brought Israel into being for my glory,” the use of *created*, *formed*, and *made* are pointing us back to the original act of creation. This is why Israel *ultimately* exists. Because this is why *all* things ultimately exist—for the glory of God.

Created for His Glory

When the first chapter of the Bible says, “So God created man *in his own image*, in the *image of God* he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27), what is the point? The point of an image is *to image*. Images are formed to express something about the original. Point to the original. Glorify the original. God made humans in his image so that the world would be filled with reflectors of God. Images of God. Many billions of statues of God. So that nobody would miss the point of creation, the point of humanity—knowing, loving, and showing God.

The angels cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; *the whole earth is full of his glory!*” (Isaiah 6:3). This earth is full of divine image-bearers, glorious ruins. And not only humans—also nature! Why such a breathtaking world for us to live in? Why such a vast universe? I read once that there are more stars in the universe than there are words and sounds that all humans of all time have ever spoken. Why?

The Bible is crystal clear about this: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). Someone may ask, “If earth is the only inhabited planet and man the only rational inhabitant among the stars, why such a large and empty universe?” The answer is, because it’s not about us. It’s about God. And that’s an understatement. God created us to know him and love him and show him. And then he gave us a hint of what he is like. That hint is the universe. The universe is declaring the glory of God, and the reason we exist is to see it and be stunned by it and glorify God because of it.

On this point, Paul writes, “His invisible attributes,

namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Romans 1:20–21). The great tragedy of the universe is that while human beings were made to glorify God, we have all fallen short of this purpose and “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” (Romans 1:23)—especially the one in the mirror. This is the essence of what we call sin.

So, why did God create the universe? Resounding through the whole Bible, from eternity to eternity, like rolling thunder, is the fact that God created the world for his glory.

Isaiah’s Testimony

Isaiah states plainly that God created the world for his glory (v. 7). He goes on to press home the reality over and over to help us feel it and make it part of the fabric of our thinking.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; ... And *the glory of the LORD shall be revealed*, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 40:4–5)

I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. (Isaiah 42:8)

Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest,

and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel. (Isaiah 44:23)

For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you... I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. (Isaiah 48:9-11)

And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' (Isaiah 49:3)

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. (Isaiah 60:2)

The Spirit of the LORD GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; ... to give them... the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. (Isaiah 61:1-3)

What *Glorify* Means

God created the world, "that he may be glorified," This does not mean "that he may be *made* glorious." Don't take *glorify* and treat it like *beautify*. "Beautify" means to take a plain room, for example, and make it beautiful. We don't take a plain God and *make* him beautiful. That is not what glorifying God means.

When God created the world, he did not create out of any need or weakness or deficiency. He created out of fullness and strength and complete sufficiency. As Jonathan Edwards said, “Tis no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain that it is inclined to overflow” (Yale: *Works*, Vol. 8, 448). So we don’t glorify God by improving his glory, but by seeing and savoring and showing his glory (which is the same as knowing and loving and showing it).

Or consider the word *magnify* (so Philippians 1:20, “that Christ be magnified” [*megalunthesetai*], ASV, KJV, NKJV). We magnify God’s glory like a telescope, not a microscope. Microscopes make small things look bigger than they are. Telescopes make unimaginably big but distant things look more like what they really are. Our lives are to be telescopes for the glory of God. We were created to see his glory, to be thrilled by his glory, and to live so as to help others see him and savor him for who and what he really is.

To know, to love, to show God’s glory—this is why the universe exists. If this takes hold of you the way it should, it will affect the way you think and feel about everything. Because now you know why everything exists. You don’t know everything—there are countless things you don’t know—but you are never at a loss to know something important about everything, because you know that everything exists for the glory of God. And so to know this one thing—that all things exist for the glory of God—is to know something supremely important about everything. You know for what purpose it ultimately exists. That is amazing.

Glory Centered in the Cross

At the same time, to simply say that God created the world for his glory is too general a statement. We can't leave it there. It's too disconnected from the persons of the Trinity and from the flow of history as God is guiding it. The question is not merely, "Why did God create the world?" but why *this* world?—why these thousands of years of human history with a glorious beginning, and a horrible fall into sin, and the history of Israel, and the coming of the Son of God into the world, and then a substitutionary death, a triumphant resurrection, the founding of the church, and the history of global missions to where we are today? Why *this* world? This history?

The short answer is, *for the glory of God's grace displayed and revealed supremely in the saving death of Jesus*. Or to say it more fully: this world—this history as it is unfolding—was created and is being guided and sustained by God so that the grace of God, supremely displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus for sinners, would be glorified throughout all eternity in the Christ-exalting joys of the redeemed.

Which means that being *God-centered* is, necessarily and specifically, to be *Christ-exalting* and to be *gospel-driven*. There is an eternally unbreakable connection between the glory of God, the glory of grace, the glory of Christ, and the glory of the cross. Indeed, everything in creation exists for the glory of God's grace displayed and revealed supremely in the saving death of Jesus.

Let's see how God's glory is connected to the cross of Christ. We can do it in five steps.

The Apex of God's Display of His Own Glory Is the Display of His Grace, Resulting in Praise

God “predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:5–6). In other words, the glory of God’s *grace*—what Paul calls “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7)—is the high point and end point in the revelation of God’s glory. And the aim of predestination is that we live to the praise of the glory of this grace forever.

This is the end point of God’s glory. Everything else, even his wrath, serves this end, for Paul says, “Desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, [God] has endured with much patience vessels of wrath... *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy*” (Romans 9:22–23). Wrath is penultimate. The glory of God’s grace on the vessels of his mercy—that is ultimate.

God Planned the Praise of the Glory of His Grace before Creation

God “chose us in him *before the foundation of the world...* to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:4, 6). Grace was not an afterthought in response to the fall of man. It was the plan, because grace is the summit of the mountain of God’s glory. And he created the world for his glory. He planned the world for the glory of his grace.

God's Plan Was That the Praise of the Glory of His Grace Would Come About through Jesus

“He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons *through Jesus Christ...* to the praise of his glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:5–6). This predestination to the praise of the glory of God’s grace happened “through Jesus Christ.” In the

eternal fellowship of the Trinity, the Father and the Son planned that God's grace would be supremely revealed through the saving work of the Son.

Again, Paul says, God "called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and *grace*, which he gave us *in Christ Jesus* before the ages began" (2 Timothy 1:9). So, before the ages of time began, the plan was for the revelation of the glory of the grace of God, specifically through Christ Jesus.

From Eternity, God's Plan Was That the Glory of God's Grace Would Reach Its High Point in the Saving Work of Jesus

We see this in the name that was already stamped on the cover of the book of the redeemed before the creation of the world. Before there was any human sin to die for, God planned that his Son be slain for sinners. We know this because, before creation, a name was given to the book of life. Revelation 13:8 tells us that "everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in *the book of life of the Lamb who was slain*" will become a worshiper of the beast.

Before creation, the name of the book was "the book of life of the Lamb who was slain." The plan was glory. The plan was grace. The plan was Christ. And the plan was death. And that death for sinners like us is the heart of the gospel, which is why Paul calls it "the gospel of the glory of Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Therefore, the Ultimate Purpose of Creating and Guiding and Sustaining This World is the Praise of the Glory of the Grace of God in the Crucifixion of His Son for Sinners

This is why Revelation shows that for all eternity we will sing "the song of the Lamb" (Revelation 15:3). We will say

with white-hot admiration and praise, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, *for you were slain*, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). We will praise ten thousand things about our Savior. But we will not say anything more glorious than this: you were slain, and ransomed millions.

So we ask in conclusion, “Why did God create the world?” And we answer with the Scriptures: God created the world for his glory. God did not create out of need. He did not create the world out of a deficiency that needed to be made up. He was not lonely. He was supremely happy in the fellowship of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He created the world to put his glory on display that his people might know him and love him and show him.

And why did he create a world that would become like this world? A world that fell into sin? A world that exchanged his glory for the glory of images? Why would he permit and guide and sustain such a world? And we answer: *for the praise of the glory of the grace of God displayed supremely in the death of Jesus.*

Closing Questions

The ultimate reason for all things is the communication of the glory of God’s grace, resulting in the eternal, happy praise of a redeemed multitude from every people and tongue and tribe and nation. All things are created and guided and sustained for the glory of God, which reaches its apex in the glory of his grace, which shines most brightly in the glory of Christ, which comes to focus most clearly in the glory of the cross. So I ask:

Is the glory of God the brightest treasure on the horizon of your future? Paul expressed the Christian heart in Romans 5:2, “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Is the glory of grace the sweetest news to your guilty soul?

Is the glory of Christ in your life the present, personal embodiment of the grace of God?

Is the glory of the cross the saddest and happiest beauty to your redeemed soul?

More about the Glory of God

GOD’S COMMITMENT TO HIS NAME

The LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself. —1 Samuel 12:22

Clearly implied in this verse is the fact that God has pleasure in his *name*. When he chooses a people, it says, he chooses them “for himself,” so that when he acts to spare them, he acts “for his great name’s sake.” Therefore, beneath and behind God’s delight in choosing a people there is a deeper delight, namely, the pleasure God has in his own name.

What does it mean that God has pleasure in his name? It means that God has pleasure in his own perfections, in his own glory. The name of God in Scripture

often means virtually the same thing as God's glorious, excellent character.

But it often means something slightly different—the glory of God *gone public*. So the name of God often refers to his reputation, his fame, his renown. This is the way we use *name* when we say someone is “making a name for himself.” Or we may call something a “name brand,” a brand with a reputation.

This is what I think Samuel means in 1 Samuel 12:22 when he says that God made Israel a people “for himself,” and that he would not cast Israel off “for his great name's sake.”

Let's look briefly at several other passages that bring out this idea of God's fame or reputation or renown.

God's Waistcloth

In the book of Jeremiah, God describes Israel as a waistcloth that had been chosen to highlight God's glory but had been found unusable. “For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the LORD, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen” (Jeremiah 13:11).

Why was Israel chosen and made the garment of God? That it might be a “name, a praise, and a glory.” In this context, *praise* and *glory* tell us that *name* means “renown” or “reputation.” God chose Israel so that the people would make a reputation for him.

David's Teaching

David teaches the same thing in one of his prayers. He says that what sets Israel apart from all the other peoples is that God has dealt with them in such a way as to make a name for himself. "And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people, whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt, a nation and its gods?" (2 Samuel 7:23).

In other words, when God went to redeem his people in Egypt and then bring them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, he was not just favoring the people. He was acting, as Samuel says, for his own "great name's sake;" or, as David says, he was "making himself a name"—a reputation.

The Point of the Exodus

Let's go back to the exodus for a moment. This is where God really formed a people for himself. For the rest of her existence Israel has looked back to the exodus as the key event in her history. So in the exodus we can see what God is up to in choosing a people for himself.

In Exodus 9, God speaks to Pharaoh a word that lets him (and us) know why God is drawing out the deliverance to ten plagues, instead of making short work of it in one swift catastrophe. This text is so crucial that Paul quotes it in Romans 9:17 to sum up God's purpose in the exodus. God says to Pharaoh, "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exodus 9:16).

The point of the exodus was to make a worldwide reputation for God. The point of the ten plagues and miraculous Red Sea crossing was to demonstrate the incredible power of God on behalf of his freely chosen people, with the aim that this reputation, this name, would be declared throughout the whole world. God has great pleasure in his reputation.

The Testimony of Isaiah

Did the later prophets and poets of Israel interpret the exodus that way? Yes, they did.

Isaiah says that God's aim in the exodus was to make for himself an everlasting name. He described God as the one,

...who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths... Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name. (Isaiah 63:12–14)

So when God showed his power to deliver his people from Egypt through the Red Sea, he had his sights on eternity and the everlasting reputation that he would win for himself in those days.

The Teaching of the Psalms

Psalm 106 teaches the same thing. “Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. ⁸Yet he saved them for his name’s sake, that he might make known his mighty power” (Psalm 106:7–8).

Do you see the same gospel logic at work here that we saw in 1 Samuel 12:22? There the sinful people had chosen a king and angered God. But God does not cast them off. Why? “For his great name’s sake.” Here it says that the sinful people had rebelled against God at the Red Sea and failed to consider his love. Yet he saved them with tremendous power. Why? Same answer: “to make for yourself a glorious name.”

Do you see that God’s first love is his name and not his people? And precisely because of this, there is hope for his sinful people. Do you see why the God-centeredness of God is the ground of the gospel?

Joshua’s Prayer

Take Joshua as another example of someone who understood this God-centered gospel logic and put it to use, like Moses did (Deuteronomy 9:27–29; Numbers 14:13–16), to plead for God’s sinful people. In Joshua 7 Israel has crossed the Jordan, entered the Promised Land, and defeated Jericho. But now they have been defeated at Ai and Joshua is stunned. He goes to the Lord in one of the most desperate prayers in all the Bible. “O LORD, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear

of it and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name?" (Joshua 7:8–9).

Do you cry for mercy on the basis of God's love for his name? The great ground of hope in all the God-centered servants of the Lord has always been the impossibility that God would let his great name be dishonored among the nations. It was inconceivable. This was bedrock confidence. Other things change, but not this—not the commitment of God to his name.

Ezekiel's Witness in Exile

But what, then, are we to make of the fact that eventually Israel proved to be so rebellious that she was indeed given into the hands of her enemies in the Babylonian captivity during the time of Ezekiel? How does a God-centered prophet like Ezekiel handle this terrible setback for the reputation of God?

Consider the word of the Lord that came to him in chapter 36. This is God's answer to the captivity of his people which he himself had brought about.

But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land." But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the LORD GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you

have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.
(Ezekiel 36:20–23)

When every other hope was gone, and the people lay under the judgment of God himself because of their own sin, one hope remained—and it will always remain—that God has an indomitable delight in the worth of his own reputation, and will not suffer it to be trodden down for long.

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

3

Christian Hedonism

The term *Christian Hedonism* may be catchy and controversial, but it's not in the Bible. No one needs to like it just because I do. So the point of this chapter is not at all to push a label or a slogan, but to talk about the massive and pervasive biblical truth that some of us love to call Christian Hedonism.

This chapter is packed with some of the juiciest, most wonderful, most astonishing truths that I love to know and experience. Here's the outline.

- There's a problem that needs be solved relating to the glory of God.
- What we call Christian Hedonism is the solution to that problem.
- The apostle Paul and C.S. Lewis provide the basis for that solution.
- This solution—Christian Hedonism—changes every-

thing in your life, which I will try to show in eleven examples.

Is God's Self-Promotion Loveless?

In chapter two we asked, "Why did God create this world?" And the answer, "God created this world *for the praise of the glory of his grace displayed and revealed supremely in the saving death of Jesus.*" This poses a problem for some people—that at the heart of that answer is God's self-promotion; that God created the world for his own praise, for his own glory. (We addressed this somewhat in chapter two, but it deserves more detailed attention here.)

Oprah Winfrey, Brad Pitt, the early C.S. Lewis, Eric Reece, and Michael Prowse, among others, all walk away from such a God. They stumble over God's self-promotion.

Oprah walked away from orthodox Christianity when she was about twenty-seven because of the biblical teaching that God is jealous—he demands that he and no one else get our highest allegiance and affection. It didn't sound loving to her.

Brad Pitt turned away from his boyhood faith, he says, because God says, "You have to say that I'm the best.... It seemed to be about ego."

C.S. Lewis, before he became a Christian, complained that God's demand to be praised sounded like "a vain woman who wants compliments."

Erik Reece, the writer of *An American Gospel*,

rejected the Jesus of the Gospels because only an egomaniac would demand that we love him more than we love our parents and children.

Michael Prowse, columnist for the *London Financial Times*, turned away because only “tyrants, puffed up with pride, crave adulation.”

So people can see this as a problem—that God created the world for his own praise. They think such self-exaltation would have to be immoral and loveless. That may be how you feel.

Christian Hedonism Offers the Answer

God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. That’s the shortest summary of what we mean by Christian Hedonism. If that is true, however, then there is no conflict between your greatest exhilaration and God’s greatest glorification.

In fact, not only is there no conflict between your happiness and God’s glory, but his glory shines in your happiness, when your happiness is in him. And since God is the source of greatest happiness, and since he is the greatest Treasure in the world, and since his glory is the most satisfying gift he could possibly give us, therefore it is the kindest, most loving thing he could possibly do—to reveal himself and magnify himself and vindicate himself for our everlasting enjoyment. “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

God is the one being for whom self-exaltation is the

most loving act, because he is exalting for us what alone can satisfy us, fully and forever. If we exalt ourselves, we are not loving, because we distract people from the one Person who can make them happy forever—God. But if God exalts himself, he draws attention to the one Person who can make us happy forever—himself. He is not an egomaniac. He is an infinitely glorious, all-satisfying God, offering us everlasting and supreme joy in himself.

That's the solution to our problem.

No, Oprah: if God were not jealous for all your affections, he would be indifferent to your final misery.

No, Brad Pitt: if God didn't demand that you see him as the best, he wouldn't care about your supreme happiness.

No, Mr. Lewis: God is not vain in demanding your praise. This is his highest virtue, and your highest joy.

No, Erik Reece: if Jesus didn't lay claim on greater love than your children do, he would be selling your heart to what cannot satisfy forever.

No, Michael Prowse: God does not crave your adulation, he offers it as your greatest pleasure.

God is most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in him. God's motivation for pursuing his own glory turns out to be love. And our duty to pursue God's glory turns out to be a quest for joy. That's the solution to the problem of God's self-exaltation.



[Happily Ever After](#)

Finding Grace in the Messes of Marriage

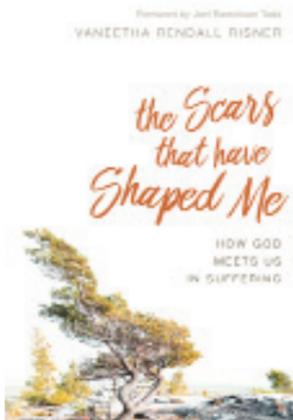
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Nancy Guthrie, author, *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*