Foreword by John Piper

The Joy Project
An Introduction to Calvinism

TONY REINKE
“Our eyes of flesh seek joy in the wrong places, define it with a bankrupt vocabulary, and settle for it using mistaken formulas. Because we don’t know what to do but try harder and hide our shame, we get stuck and sick, depressed and despondent. This dehumanizes us, discourages us, and defeats us. But there is hope! The Joy Project is applied Reformed theology at its best.”

–Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, Author, The Gospel Comes with a House Key

“Biblically, colorfully, and with realistic precision, Tony Reinke presents God’s work of saving grace as a jamboree of overwhelming sovereign joy. This is a book of deep truth that does good to the heart as well as the head.”

–J. I. Packer, Professor, Vancouver, British Columbia

“The Joy Project is a celebration of Reformed theology, and in this way it’s more in keeping with the Bible’s treatment of the subject—behold the beauty before bemoaning the controversies. We cover this topic briefly in our church membership class, and for those who want to pursue it further, this book, for its accessibility and warmth, is the one I’ll recommend first.”

–Benjamin Vrbicek, Pastor, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

“What do you get when you combine Gretchen Rubin’s The Happiness Project with the Five Points of Calvinism and Tony Reinke’s compelling writing? You’re looking at it. It sounds like a weird and unworkable combination, but it works well and results in an outstandingly beautiful presentation of the doctrines of grace. This is the most beautiful presentation of Calvinism I’ve ever read.”

–David Murray, Professor, Puritan Reformed Seminary

“Tony Reinke’s The Joy Project is a unique and delightful summary of the unfolding drama of God’s sovereign grace. Tony, as usual, is biblical, Christ-honoring, gospel-centric, imaginative, and articulate. Who could ask for more? You will enjoy this book!”

–Randy Alcorn, Director, Eternal Perspective Ministries
“At the end of a restless day we look to the self-help gurus, but they can only give us magnifying glasses to gaze more deeply into our own navels. Lift your sights through *The Joy Project* and rejoice to read that joy is actually coming for you.”

—GLORIA FURMAN, Author, *Alive in Him*

“‘Joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory’ (1 Pet. 1:8). But what does that mean? Is it for me? How do I get it? What does it feel like? Is it okay for me to want it? How will it change my life? Is this ‘joy’ the same as being ‘happy’? If not, what’s the difference? And what does joy have to do with God’s sovereign, saving grace for sinners in Jesus Christ? Yes, there are answers to these questions. And Tony Reinke does a masterful job in providing them. Read on, then, and rejoice with joy everlasting!”

—SAM STORMS, Pastor, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“We all want joy and happiness — but they seem such elusive things. We reach for them and fall, we aim and miss. For me that’s because I make them dependent on me: how I’m doing, how I’m feeling. Tony Reinke shows a far sweeter way, a way to solid joy.”

—MICHAEL REEVES, President, Union School of Theology, Oxford
The Joy Project

An Introduction to Calvinism

Tony Reinke

Foreword by John Piper
Dedicated to our prayer and financial partners around the world—the joyful, generous, and beloved colaborers behind everything we publish at desiringGod.org.
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How Calvinists Miss the Key to Happiness
Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him.
Isaiah 42:1
Foreword:

What If?
Could it be that Christianity is very different than the impressions you have from your experience?

I recall how thunderstruck I was, in my early twenties, even as a Christian, to hear my teacher say, “the problem with the world is not that people are seeking their own happiness, but that they are far too easily pleased.”

I had the confused notion that I needed to get rid of my desire to be happy so that I could do the will of God. Now here was someone saying: that’s not your problem. Your problem is that you are not passionately committed to the pursuit of joy.

This was mind-boggling. And true. Biblically true. I have spent the last fifty years looking at things through this lens—trying to see reality the way it really is.

- What if the essence of my sin were the incapacity for supreme joy?
- What if sin were the loss of taste for what is supremely delicious?
- What if sin were the craving for the taste of poison?
• What if God, from all eternity, has been planning a kind of pleasure so great that no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into any human imagination?

• What if God sent his Son into the world with the mandate to remove every obstacle to perfect happiness, and to create a people willing and able to be that happy in his presence?

• What if his Son bought this all-satisfying destiny for his people at the cost of his own life?

• What if God sent his Spirit into the world to be the down-payment of this ecstasy, and to use all his omnipotence to make sure we arrive in his presence where there are pleasures forevermore?

Those questions lead to a view of reality that can turn your world upside down. Discovering in the Bible the roots of this way of looking at the world is utterly liberating.

I’m not exaggerating when I say that there are few people alive today who have gone down deeper into those roots than Tony Reinke. His book *The Joy Project* tells the story of the world—a God-saturated world that is on its way to becoming radiant with joy. It is the story of Christianity.

The supremacy of God and the satisfaction of the human soul are the two great realities we cannot escape. I used to think that God was in pursuit of the first, and I was in pursuit of the second. And that was the greatest problem to be overcome. I don’t see it that way anymore.
No. God is in pursuit of both. He knows that the human soul will never be satisfied until it treasures the supremacy of God above all things. And he knows that his own supremacy shines most brightly in the soul of those who are satisfied in him. That’s the way he made the world.

My problem (is it yours too?) was not that I wanted a satisfied soul. My problem was that I couldn’t taste and see the all-satisfying God. And to my amazement I discovered that the story of Christianity is the story of God’s pursuit of my joy—his quest, at the cost of his Son’s life, to replace my blindness with a sight of beauty, and to replace my craving for poison with a taste for his all-satisfying perfections. This is Christianity—The Joy Project.

My prayer is that you, and thousands more, will take up and read, and waken to the wonder that you are being pursued—through the brightest blessings and the darkest sorrows—with Joy.

John Piper
February 2018
Introduction:

We Must Have Joy
How much of your life is driven by the desire for joy?

Well, all of it. We know we need joy like we need food and water. But how we get joy is something of a mystery, and most of us are content to leave that mystery unsolved. We simply want to experience the delight we desire, without doing any hard work to get it.

Joy is real, but joy is also elusive. Just when we think we’ve got a handful of happiness, we watch it run through our fingers and vanish. Where does it go?

For many of us, this quest for joy leads—with terrible irony—to despair. We pursue joy in materialism, and we get stuck deeper in debt. We pursue joy in our children, and we gnaw ourselves with worry over their well-being. We pursue marital perfection, and we grumble when faced with our spouse’s faults.

We aim for joy, and we find doubt. Is joy really so mysterious and circumstantial? Is joy poisoned? What if our desire for ultimate joy is really just a curse? What if the promise of all-satisfying joy is life’s cruelest hoax?

And yet, no matter how hard we are let down, and no matter how hard we fail, we cannot stop
looking for joy. It drives us. We don’t stop—we can’t stop, we won’t stop. So we turn to personal discipline and how-to books, life hacks, and gimmicky life-organization tools, all thinking that our main problem must be a failure of focus.

We conclude that the barriers to abiding joy are the unhealthy choices that clog our lives. The root problem, we think, is that we’re stuck in a rut of predictability, so we must unstick ourselves with novelty. We turn to self-improvement, make new resolutions, scour the Internet for list-blogs that promise lasting change with easy effort. We buy productivity apps for our phones. We resolve to become more “chill” parents, sexier spouses, better friend-winners, and more purposeful people-influencers. We need to sit less and walk more. We need to sleep more and eat less. We need to get to the gym a few times a week to lose fat and build muscle. We purge fast food, drop the carbs, and fork down more vegetables. We drink more water, less coffee, less soda. We buy organic, fair trade, rBGH-free, gluten-free, free-range. We pay off credit card debt and build our savings. We clip coupons. We invest money in a new retirement plan and set aside some funds for a future vacation. We clean out the garage. We purge our closets of junk. We buy apps to track our steps and measure our progress, and planners to micromanage our days. We commit to staying on top of our emails, checking our phones less often, watching less television, visiting the library more, and reading our neglected stacks of books.
We chase a list of changes to sharpen our daily routines, to tweak our daily habits, and to find our daily joy. So it’s no surprise that how-to books promising us this high-powered life sell by the millions. One such guide is *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun*, the whimsically titled *New York Times* best seller by Gretchen Rubin.

In her book, and others like it, each step of personal discipline promises to bring a mounting list of small changes that snowball into a happy life. The lesson we learn from it all is what Rubin knows well: Increased joy rarely comes by accident. Most of our “joy” appears only after strategic planning, goal setting, and self-discipline, or—on some sweet occasions—by a surprise gift from the planning and sacrifices of a spouse or friend.

**A True Story of Inescapable Happiness**

Yes, joy does hinge on a plan (more on that in a moment). But the premise behind the promise of all this happiness is the problem. For Rubin and other writers, it all hinges on you: your structured resolutions, your renewed convictions, and your decisive discipline. The hitch with books like *The Happiness Project* is that personal joy gets thrown back on you: your initiative, your planning, your work, your determination. Happiness can be yours, but only if you earn it. For the go-getters, joy earned at the end of long lists and assignments may be good news. But
most of us see these ploys as tedious burdens that only mount, making us even more buried under the acute sense of our lacking efficiency.

If you’re like me, you take stock of your disordered life—the cluttered corners, the grubby margins of your days, and the unkempt middle where you do most of your living—and the result is painfully deflating. Rather than increasing your joy, all this introspection breeds regret and self-loathing.

What if all our focus on changing personal patterns misses a much bigger and more important point?

- What if joy goes deeper than the flimsy foundations of organized day planners, thinned-out closets, freshly painted walls, or a perfectly followed gym routine?
- What if joy is not found at the end of a to-do list?
- What if joy is not governed by the personality assigned to me by the lottery of my genetic heritage?
- What if Aristotle, when he said my happiness depends on me, was fundamentally wrong?

To say it another way: What if I told you someone else was more concerned for your joy than you could ever be? What if this person has been planning your joy since before you were born? Would you believe me, or would you write me off as a well-meaning but ignorant religious optimist? If you’ll hear me out, I want to share with you a true story of inescapable
happiness. The joy ahead is no mirage; it is more real than this book in front of you.

This one path to unending joy is called The Joy Project. It isn’t DIY. You cannot start it. You cannot end it. And you cannot fumble it. You can’t even hold the lynchpin to keep it all together. The Joy Project is put in capital letters in this book because it’s bigger than you and bigger than me. It was designed and orchestrated for you, long before the moment when you awoke to discover that your entire life is driven by the endless hunt for happiness.

The Joy Project

To make sense of it all, we must first get painfully honest with ourselves and face the reasons for our unhappiness with unshrinking grit. Do we want to know the truth? The truth is that our lives are filled with so much self-doubt and fretting over minor things that we can hardly remember that we were made by God to rule and reign over this world as we image him. If we’re being honest, we don’t resonate with royalty. More often we live our lives timidly, slightly confused, weighed down by our own baggage, stumbling over our insecurities.

We are not the first to look into this mirror of honest reflection and to face our fears, and that is why a group of Christians in the seventeenth century met to settle themselves on the most concrete realities in the universe. At a pivotal moment, gathered in a
town called Dordrecht,¹ they drafted a theological vision that would later be remembered by its acronym: TULIP, the Netherlands’s most famous flower and a useful mnemonic aid to explain the content of God’s redeeming work in the Bible in five unfolding points.

- **Total Depravity** is not just badness, but blindness to beauty and deadness to joy.
- **Unconditional Election** is how God planned, before we existed, to complete our joy in Christ.
- **Limited Atonement** is the assurance that indestructible joy in God is infallibly secured for us by the blood of Jesus.
- **Irresistible Grace** is the sovereign commitment of God to make sure we hold on to superior delights instead of the false pleasures that will ultimately destroy us.
- **Perseverance of the Saints** is the almighty work of God to keep us, through all affliction and suffering, for an inheritance of pleasures at God’s right hand forever.²

This precious acronym is a bulb of truth buried deep in the soil of Scripture. My prayer is that it will sprout, grow, and blossom in your heart and mind as the pages of this book unfold. My hope is that you will catch a glimpse of its beautiful narrative,

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¹ Also known as “The Synod of Dort”—after the host city, Dordrecht—the synod lasted from November 13, 1618 to May 9, 1619. The result was a document called the “Canons of Dordrecht,” or “Canons of Dort,” which was later summarized into TULIP.

because this story reaches back before the dawn of time, stretches forward into the far reaches of eternity, and fills up every gap in between.

The terms will make more sense as the story unfolds. We can call it “TULIP,” or “the doctrines of grace,” or “Reformed theology,” or “Augustinianism,” or “Calvinism,” or, as I will call it in this book, “The Joy Project.” The point is simple. God's plan for us is not bound by the circumstances of this fallen, joy-killing planet. God's plan for our joy rests on a foundation deeper than our daily resolutions. It is bigger than our anxieties and fears. It is brighter than our darkest secrets. It searches our hearts and exposes the roots of our passions and steers us toward eternal joys. Most importantly, The Joy Project reveals the heart of God and the infinite joys he is eager to give and share.

The Joy Project is a story that reminds us we are characters in God's unfolding cosmic story. God has written our joy into a script, and what he planned for us we can hardly imagine. The Joy Project is the boldest story ever told. It will shock you, then it will bewilder you, and then it will plunge you into an ocean of divine love. It is a drama told in five acts.

A Story Told and Retold

The Joy Project is the heartbeat of Scripture. Neglect the Bible, and you neglect God’s Joy Project, and you neglect your own joy. As we will discover, we were
made for joy, and our pursuit of it is essential to our lives and essential to our obedience to God.³

These doctrines of grace are not the deep space of Scripture; rather, they are its major constellations: bright, burning signs of God's sovereign and saving activity. The story is so wonderful, so captivating, that it must be told and retold. For centuries, pastors and theologians have taken this sacred tradition and passed it on to new generations of Christians. The Joy Project is bright in the writings of the early church fathers (pastors and theologians such as Augustine) and shines in the Reformed tradition beginning in the sixteenth century (by men like John Calvin). Later it was carried on by the English Puritans (by men such as Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, David Clarkson, and Thomas Boston) and then passed to the American Puritans of the eighteenth century (notably Jonathan Edwards). In the nineteenth century, pulpits still glowed with its message (principally in the booming voice of the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon), and it is now entrusted to us. All these voices, from history and from our own time, will help us discover the magnificence of God's plan.

Even though church history tells an important story of The Joy Project, the voice of the Script Writer speaks most credibly and conclusively in the pages of the Bible. God has spoken on this subject from many different angles to convince us—without a doubt—of the greatest news in the universe: our eter-

³ For a sampling of passages that show the centrality of joy in the life of God’s people, see Deut. 28:47; 1 Chron. 16:31, 33; Neh. 8:10; Pss. 32:11; 33:1; 35:9; 40:8, 16; 42:1–2; 63:1, 11; 64:10; 95:1; 97:1, 12; 98:4; 104:34; 105:3; Isa. 41:16; Joel 2:23; Zech. 2:10; 10:7; Rom. 5:2–3, 11; Phil. 3:1; 4:4.
nal joy will flourish when we are the object of God’s sovereign grace. Nothing about this story is accidental. God purposed all of it (Rom. 9:11). He planned it. We are alive in the script penned by the triune God—the joy shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit now shared with you and me.

The Joy Project is the greatest story ever told. And it’s deeply personal. And yet the story is not G-rated. It will cause us to face the dark brutality of our world—and our own hearts—with blunt honesty. And this is where The Joy Project begins: act 1—a deep dive into the chief motive that drives humanity.
Act 1:

The World’s Joy-Tragedy
In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, former atheist C. S. Lewis offers a profound insight into the psychological engine that pulls along the entire train of human experience: “All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”¹

Simply put, the driving motive in history is the desire for happiness. All sins—from slavery to prostitution to racism to terrorism to extortion to the sparks that ignite world wars—are driven by a desire for happiness apart from God.

In one sentence, Lewis jabs a steel dental probe into the raw, unmedicated nerve of atheism. But the greatest hazard we face is not *intellectual atheism*—denying that God exists. Our most desperate problem is *affectional atheism*—refusing to believe God is the object of our greatest and most enduring joy. This is the heart of our foolishness. The fool speaks from the depths of his affections and longings and declares: God is irrelevant.²

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² Ps. 14:1.
This affectional atheism infects every heart, even the most religious ones.

**Atheists to the Core**

As the lessons of history show, such heart cancer spreads social decay and eventual ruin. The problem with the world is not the presence of intellectual atheists, but the pervasiveness of fallen hearts wandering away from God. If we could see our motives clearly, we would see our sins starkly. We are born with the temptation to seek joy outside of God, and this affliction affects everyone around us.³

What happens when we seek joy without God? We oppress. We step on toes. We wound and offend. In turn, we are assaulted; other self-absorbed atheists seek their own personal happiness at our expense. Believe it: if you don’t use someone first, you’ll get used soon enough.

Tragically, these selfish desires often attract people to one another, leading toward an inevitable collision. We have all watched this play out in the real world. In the search for joy, a single man who idolizes sex is motivated to date. In the pursuit of joy, a single woman who idolizes the attention of men to fund her sense of self-worth is motivated to date. They meet. At first the pleasures seem fulfilling, but they little comprehend how the surface union and fleeting joys mask maliciousness underneath. For a moment, it costs the man his time, attention, and

³ Ps. 14:1–4; Rom. 3:10–18.
money. It costs the woman the vulnerability of her body. But there seems to be a warm glow of love, the gratification of personal desires, and the blossom of a permanently satisfying relationship.

But idolatrous hearts are hungry things, never satisfied. Eventually the man's eyes are drawn to the woman at the bar and un-drawn from this woman across the table. The man's kindnesses will eventually be exposed for what they are: unheroic and unmanly offerings, spare change from the pocket of his soul. And, appallingly, the woman's body will be cast aside as merely a crude tool to satisfy a man's godless appetite. Beneath this thin veneer of “love” is a relationship between two sinners, two isolated sinners, two atheists whose affections are disconnected from God and who use one another in a futile attempt to fill the gap. It will end in war.

**Fight Club**

We exploit one another in our pursuit of personal happiness, and we end up with vicious personal conflict. James 4:1–12 helps us understand why this happens by asking us, point-blank: What causes fights and quarrels in our lives? What fuels the flames of anger, bitterness, and wrath in our hearts?

The answer isn't complicated, but it is profound. We war against one another because we claw for godless joys. We idolize the pleasures that we think will satisfy our souls—sex, power, wealth, fame, worldly security, comfort, you name it—but we don't get them, they elude our clutches, and so we covet.
We use. We get used. We seek our worth in superiority, and we step on others in the process. We ride emotional highs and plummet on depressive lows because we value our perceived self-worth more than God’s design. In our pride, we become enemies of one another because we have become enemies of God. We reject him. He rejects our rebellion. We reject the abundant supplies of God. We become empty, we use others, and we cut each other down. Welcome to the fight club.

The reality is stark, and the problem is universal. Puritan Richard Sibbes sums up our tragic predicament: “Before the heart be changed, our judgment is depraved in regard of our last end; we seek our happiness where it is not to be found.”4 Misplaced affection is the root problem behind all conflict. Preoccupied with the streams, we are blind to the fountain of joy. We reject God. Blind to God’s beauty and to his pleasures, we seek to satisfy ourselves with pleasures of the flesh that are too trivial to satisfy hungry souls. Feasting only upon creation as the source of joy, our hearts have withered and died. Born with an appetite for the everlasting, we are starved for sustaining joy.

Look around. Everyone is chasing something. That’s the point of Lewis and James and Sibbes. Whether we know it or admit it, we all chase an end. Our end is our chief good, the best thing we labor to

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4 Richard Sibbes, The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes [Edinburgh, 1862], 1:181. All quotes have been taken from original sources; however, most of the direct quotes in this book drawn from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources have been slightly modified in wording and punctuation to enhance readability.
obtain, that goal for which we will use everything else in this life to reach. My “last end” is whatever I determine to be my greatest treasure, or whatever I think will make me happiest to have. Sex or attention or independence or power or fame or wealth or comfort: each of these ultimate ends exposes the practical atheism of our hearts. So Puritan Richard Baxter can say, “The chief part of man’s corruption consists in a wrong chief good, a wrong treasure, a wrong security.”  

Perceptive students of the human soul know that the question we all must face cuts very deep: What’s the one thing I cannot live without?

This question demolishes facades and exposes sin. Sin is not merely wrong doing; sin is essentially wrong adoring. Sin is the fastening of our hearts on any good, treasure, or security in life that replaces the good, treasure, and security of God. This is the chief question of our lives. This is the chief determination of our joy. This is the misstep that sends us down the rabbit hole, where we find ourselves lost atheists in the deepest core of our being.

**Ravenous Eyes**

We will return to this dynamic at various points throughout the story. For now, we must see our native blindness to God’s abundant beauty. Our drifting eyes turn from one idol to another, grow wider at every new delicacy, and feast on a buffet of spir-

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Itual adultery. John Calvin explains how this works in the context of physical infidelity: “Adulterers by their wandering glances, generate the flames of lust, and so their heart is set on fire.”\footnote{John Calvin, \textit{Commentary on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel} (Edinburgh, 1849), 231. Commenting on Ezek. 6:9.} The heart is lured by wandering eyes—eye lust.\footnote{1 John 2:16.} Perceptive marketers know how this works. Take any new digital technology (like a new smartphone), float it in the air before our eyes, give us a long look at the shapely aluminum and the flawless glass face, and we will immediately feel lured to it.

Phones are not sinful, but when we ignore the beauty of the unseen God, we worship only the visible world. What we see around us is what we hunt, and what we hunt fuels the lust for what we long to see. A new technology only breeds new desires for even newer technology to control our lives. This futile cycle is never broken, because our eyes are never satisfied (Prov. 27:20).

This vain appetite for innovation also explains why idols take many different forms in every century or culture. Idols appear as wood carved into a sacred pole, gold molded into a calf, ivory shaped into a statuette, cardboard printed into a lottery ticket, a glossy magazine cover published with an airbrushed image of a model, or a piece of metal and glass brought together in an attractive new phone.

The long trajectory of the human predicament is as a rock climber, eyes scanning to find the next visible handhold, groping for something new to
satisfy our hearts. With each new hold we increase
the flame of lust in our hearts, propelling ourselves
toward the summit of godless satisfaction. But the
summit is false and the climb is futile. The end never
arrives because the aim was wrong from the begin-
ing—it was the wrong mountain. And all the while,
with each step, we only increase the height from
which we eventually must fall.

But our foolish hearts keep doing it. We keep
turning back to our addictions to find our meaning
and value. Over and over we make this tragic mis-
take. We become idol addicts.

**Idol Addicts**

Meet Joelle van Dyne. Joelle is a young woman who
hides her face behind a veil. Why she does so, we
don’t know. Perhaps she was disfigured in a child-
hood accident, or perhaps, as she claims, her strik-
ing beauty casts an irresistible spell over the men in
her life. But what we do know is that Joelle, hidden
behind her veil, is a forceful character in David Fos-
ter Wallace’s huge novel, *Infinite Jest*.

Joelle sets out on an ambitious quest to obtain
happiness, and apparently her veil protects her in
the pursuit. Groping for pleasure, Joelle turns to
freebase cocaine, and there she finds an explosive
experience that, in a moment, “frees and condenses,
compresses the whole experience to the implosion
of one terrible shattering spike in the graph, an af-
flated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly,
attractive, sheltered by limits, deveiled and loved,
observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God.”8 In her longing, she discovers in cocaine a fleeting experience of meaning, love, and value. But the feeling is a vapor.

Like Joelle’s cocaine, our sin addictions are pleasure-hits of hallucination. The form of our addictions may be more socially acceptable: gambling, gaming, eating, shopping, or fishing for praise from our peers. But the lure behind every addiction is the same. We turn to a God-substitute to find our joy, our security, our hope, and our approval. We get a moment’s gratification, a faint glimmer of what it must feel like to stand beautiful in the presence of God. But such a feeling is a hallucination. Our idols have no hands to embrace us, no eyes to see us, no mouths to assure us, no ears to hear us. Instead, we who have worshiped them become like them: blind, mute, deaf, and powerless.9 “Coming down” from our euphoric high, we must battle all over again the anxiety, the paranoia, and the grim realization that once again we have not escaped ourselves. We are no more loved. We are no more satisfied. We are only doomed to repeat this episode of self-destruction.

Our Idols and Others

On the one hand, this is a personal tragedy. By sinning we diminish ourselves. Sin distorts any remaining good within us, and idolatry steals our identity.

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9 Ps. 115:4-8.
We are always becoming what we worship.\textsuperscript{10} And that means we are always un-becoming our true selves.\textsuperscript{11}

This tragic degeneration of ourselves goes almost unnoticed, said Søren Kierkegaard. “The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed.”\textsuperscript{12}

Our idols misshape our soul like drugs alter the facial features of a meth addict. But unlike a drug-ravaged face, whose degeneration can be captured by time-lapsed photos, we don’t see the drastic changes to our soul quite so blatantly. But this soul-distortion afflicts everyone who follows after the pleasures of sin.

On the other hand, idolatry is never an isolated tragedy. Addictive pleasures corrode our relationships, our families, and our communities. We naïvely think that our hand-sized, personal idols are our private business, when in fact they emit an often unseen blast of radiation that issues from us through the lives of countless other people around us. The radiation of our idolatry is often invisible, so too the scars it leaves behind. The idols we latch onto (in our search for love, worth, and security) determine how we evaluate and treat others.

\textsuperscript{10} Rom. 1:23; 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10.
\textsuperscript{11} Think of the haunting portrait of Weston in C. S. Lewis’s novel Perelandra.
We end up measuring the worth of others by the idols we worship. We idolize those we want to become. We become so self-absorbed that we can only envy those who are superior to us and project jealousy toward our rivals. We despise ourselves under those we place above us; we pride ourselves over those we place beneath us. We treat others in harsh and inhumane ways. People are our competitors and our pawns. Our hard and cold idols make us hard and cold people. But though we are terribly alone, we all know from experience that this kind of negative, critical spirit spreads from person to person like flames in a dry forest.

Personal idols dehumanize us. They deform us. And they pervert our evaluation of others and erode our relationships. The idol of sex leads us to objectify the bodies of the beautiful and to shun the unattractive. The idol of wealth leads us to objectify the wealthy and to shun the poor. The idol of physical skill leads us to objectify athletes and to shun the gawky. On and on like this we go in our relationships to the people around us. We judge others on the basis of our pantheon of false gods.

Separated from our true selves, we are a mass of confusion. We seek happiness by lying to ourselves, we view the world through the slanted lenses of our own perverted sense of self-worth, and we confuse and trample everyone else along the way. If sin is the poison of our joy, it is also the lethal dose that we toss into the community well.
Totally Depraved

If we imagine a dead soul groping for satisfaction where lasting pleasure cannot be found, and using others in the process, then we accurately picture what is called “total depravity.” This is the first letter in the acronym TULIP, the dark first act in the drama of God’s Joy Project.

Total depravity does not mean we are all agents of unmitigated evil. You and I are not Adolf Hitlers who promote genocide, consign humans to gas chambers, or live by the drumbeat of demonic cruelty. But in our fallen human nature, we are all corrupted by evil desires. Our minds, our wills, our affections, our imaginations—no piece of our identity escapes the wicked perversity of our fallen race. So while we’re not all wicked despots who throw bodies into a furnace, we do throw the reputations of others into the furnace of slander. We talk behind backs and defame our neighbors. We take disturbing delight in the failures of others. The depravity that massacres reputations is the same depravity that slays bodies. Our anger is easily stoked into hatred against others, and this anger is nothing less than embryonic murder. ¹³

While the scale of the devastation we cause will differ and vary from the most violent in this world, we all carry in us the seeds of the same depravity. And our depravity is inescapable.

Again, we can summarize total depravity not just as badness, but as blindness to beauty and deadness to joy. Our root problem is not that we break God’s
commands; our problem is that we have no interest in God. Ignoring divine beauty is the essence of total depravity. It’s what makes the depravity so holistic—we cannot begin to imagine how any real sense of pleasure or joy can be found in our Creator! To us sinners, God is only a boring obstacle to our joy. This dynamic is what makes our depravity total.

Guilty Pleasures

Let’s turn again to the old Puritans who understood how this sly depravity works. They said that to be dominated by sin is to have the heart’s affections “vitiated”—an old way of saying the emotions are mangled beyond recognition. Depravity spoils the heart of what it was created to be and do.

The sinner’s plight is this: “He cannot get his wicked will gratified, or his carnal affections satisfied.”14 When the natural world offers no more satisfying delights, the heart lusts for unnatural ones.15 Because the sinner’s lusts are insatiable, the sum total of this finite world cannot gratify him.

We are dying sinners in desperate need of a spiritual double-bypass surgery, but we spend our pocket change on double cheeseburgers. We get happy again with a momentary food buzz, but the temporary thrill is slowly killing us. This is fundamentally what it means to be a sinner, and our self-undoing sins go unnoticed because they are often socially

14 Ralph Erskine, The Sermons and Other Practical Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Mr. Ralph Erskine (Glasgow: W. Smith, 1777), 1:390.
15 Rom. 1:18–32.
accepted (and sometimes socially celebrated). But behind all our sin is a corrupt heart lusting after not only what ignores God, but ultimately what ruins our joy. We would have it no other way.

The reality of total depravity lands us here. We love what destroys us; we are blind to what satisfies us. Total depravity suffocates the soul’s happiness by the soul’s own wayward desires. It is total blindness to God’s matchless beauty. It is total resistance to supreme joy in God. It is the essence of all sin. Low thoughts about God are the root of our total depravity. This is the great human tragedy. This is affectional atheism.

To lust after godless orgasms of the heart is death. We are willing and guilty. We can find only one remedy to this comprehensive depravity, but we cannot find it inside of ourselves.

**Now What?**

All of this is heavy, but it’s where act 1 in The Joy Project ends and the curtain closes. Total depravity is desperate helplessness. Each of us must get our life in order—but we are powerless to do it.

This is the essential self-awareness we need. “The doctrine of original sin is rude. It is the most incomprehensible of all the doctrines,” said pastor Tim Keller. “And yet without it, we become incomprehensible to ourselves.”

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16 Rom. 8:6.

We must understand ourselves before we can comprehend God’s Joy Project. And if self-awareness is essential, self-hate is powerless to remedy the problems we find in our hearts. Our eyes must be pointed beyond ourselves altogether. “The Lord doesn’t talk about your sin so you’ll think you’re trash,” writes one modern-day Calvinist. “He talks about it just because you’re not. He talks about it because he made you in his own image, with an infinitely higher and brighter plan for you than the one you chose for yourself.”

This is the plot twist. God points us to ourselves so that he might point us away from ourselves. He reveals our depravity so that we might consider his totality: the totality of his love, his goodness, and his beauty. He directs us in that he might direct us out—out toward his soul-satisfying joy.

It’s clear, then, that in light of this human tragedy called “total depravity,” our true and lasting joy depends on some bold and divine infringement on our self-destruction. If we are to live, someone must intervene. Someone must break us. Someone must batter our heart and capture its worshiping gaze. We must be ravished, set free from our idols by an unmatched beauty. We don’t need a list of practical solutions to get our lives in order; we need a loving God to invade our chaos.