

The LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

1 SAMUEL 3:21

*More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

PSALM 19:10

The cross of Christ he gloried and rejoiced in; this his heart was set upon; and these were the effects of it—it crucified the world unto him, made it a dead and undesirable thing. The baits and pleasures of sin are taken all of them out of the world. . . . If the heart be filled with the cross of Christ, it casts death and undesirableness upon them all; it leaves no seeming beauty, no appearing pleasure or comeliness, in them.

JOHN OWEN

*On Indwelling Sin in Believers*¹

The Worth of God's Word in the Fight for Joy

*Seeing the Measure of
This Mighty Weapon*



The fundamental reason that the Word of God is essential to joy in God is that God reveals *himself* mainly by his Word. And seeing this revelation of God is the foundation of our joy. As it was in the days of Samuel, so it is today: “The LORD *appeared* . . . at Shiloh, for the LORD *revealed himself* to Samuel at Shiloh *by the word of the LORD*” (1 Sam. 3:21). When it says, “The LORD *appeared*,” it says something amazing. God was seen not with the eyes of the head, but with the eyes of the heart, for God is “the King of ages, immortal, *invisible*, the only God” (1 Tim. 1:17). And though it may seem strange, this *seeing* at Shiloh happened “*by the word* of the LORD.” As the Word was heard, the Lord was seen. In the hearing was the seeing. The spiritual hearing of God’s Word becomes the spiritual seeing of God’s glory.

HOW IS GOD SEEN TODAY?

So it is in the gospel today. Paul says that becoming a Christian means “seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). The gospel is news about the death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

It is a word to be heard. And in this hearing there is something to be seen: “The light . . . of the glory of Christ.” In the hearing is the seeing. The Lord opens the eyes of the heart to see the glory of Christ in the Word. God has chosen in this age to reveal himself to the world mainly through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, by means of the written Word, the Bible.²

The reason this is so crucial in the fight for joy is that God himself is the ultimate object of our enjoyment. But God “reveals himself . . . *by the word.*” Oh, how precious is the Bible! Here is where we see God most clearly and most surely. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes and grants us to see the beauty of Christ (Matt. 16:17; Acts 16:14). If there were no Bible, there would be no lasting joy. Even those who yet have no Bible in their language depend on the Bible for the Christ-revealing, saving knowledge of God.

God can and does show himself in other ways, especially through the works of believers (Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12; 1 Cor. 12:7). But none of them reveals God with the clarity and fullness of the Bible. All of them orbit around the sun of God’s written Word. And if the central gravitational power of the sun is denied, all the planets fly into confusion.

To be sure, in the fight for joy we will not kneel forever over our Bibles. We will get up and walk with Jesus onto the Calvary road. And there, in the risks and the afflictions of love, we will see the Jesus of the Word in the manifestations of power. This too is part of our joy. Sometimes it will be extraordinary, miraculous power. More often it will be the supernatural grace of self-denying sacrifice, unwavering faith, and the conversion of sinners into lovers of Christ. In all this we will see the Lord and rejoice. But all these manifestations of Christ would be vague and blurry without the written Word to guide our understanding and guard our hearts. We need the Word of God not only to see God in the Word, but to see him rightly anywhere else.

ADMITTING THE SIN OF RELUCTANCE TO READ THE BIBLE

A thousand interesting things compete for our attention to the Word of God. I confess that after fifty years of loving and reading and memorizing Scripture, I can be lured away from appointed times in the Word by something as insignificant as a new computer device. The illusory pleasure of newness can temporarily trump the far superior benefits of keeping my appointment with the Word of God.

This is evidence in me of what Paul calls indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17, 20, 23). It is part of the remaining corruption lingering after the death of the old self (Rom. 6:6). I am not proud of it. It grieves me. At times it frightens me. It is part of the reason I speak so much of the fight for joy. I know this sinful inclination must be fought to the death. It is this fight Paul has in mind when he says, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (Col. 3:5). We will speak shortly about how the Word helps us do that. But first we must fight just to keep our appointments with the Word.

One of the ways we can fight against the inclinations that lure us from the Word of God to computers or television or any other substitute pleasure is to remind ourselves often of the immeasurable and superior benefits of the Word of God in our lives. We must put the evidence before us that reading, pondering, memorizing, and studying the Bible will yield more joy in this life and the next than all the things that lure us from it.

There are many different reasons why the Bible has this joy-producing effect. I don't want to minimize this diversity or belittle the range of benefits that the Bible has in our lives—more than any of us realizes. But I want to stress that ultimately, in and through all its benefits, the Bible leads us to superior and lasting joy because it leads us to Christ, especially to see his glory and enjoy his fellowship. All the varied benefits are beneficial finally because they show us and bring us more of Christ to enjoy.

SEEING THE WORTH OF SCRIPTURE

In this chapter, then, consider with me just ten of these benefits, and as you read them, ask God to give you eyes to see the worth of Scripture and to waken in you an unyielding desire for the Word of God. This is a fight for joy, and the weapon in this chapter is a fresh sight of how the worth of God's Word surpasses all things on this earth.

1. The Word of God awakens and strengthens *faith*.

The Holy Spirit does not awaken and strengthen faith apart from the Word of God. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The reason for this is that the Spirit has

been sent into the world to glorify Christ. But Christ would not be glorified if the Spirit wakened faith in the absence of the revelation of the glory of Christ in the gospel.

“When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus said, “he will glorify me” (John 16:13-14). If the Spirit brought us to faith in the absence of the proclamation of Christ in his Word, our faith would not be in Christ, and he would not be honored. Therefore the Spirit binds his faith-wakening ministry to the Christ-exalting Word. Which means that when we go to the Word of Christ, we put ourselves in the path of the Spirit’s willingness to reveal Christ to us and strengthen our faith. And in this faith is the taste and the seed of all our joy. Therefore, the Word that wakens our faith works for our joy.

2. Through hearing the Word, God supplies the *Holy Spirit*.

The Spirit of God produces both a subconscious influence bringing us to faith, and a conscious experience of power and personal fellowship that come through that very faith. This explains two things: 1) This is why the Bible can speak of the Spirit blowing where he wills and having merciful effects in our lives before we were able to choose them (John 3:6-8; 6:36, 44, 65). In other words, by his unconscious influence he works in us to enable us to hear and welcome the Word. And 2) this is also why the Bible speaks of the Spirit coming through our hearing the Word of God. In other words, conscious fellowship with the Spirit is given when we hear the Word of God with faith.

Thus Paul says in Galatians 3:5, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” The answer, of course, is “by hearing with faith.” Notice the word *hearing*. It implies that words have been spoken. Paul has preached the Word of God. Now he reminds them: “Hearing that Word with faith was the means by which the Spirit was given to you.” So the Spirit comes (unconsciously) *before* we trust him and thus enables us to believe in God’s Word; and the Spirit comes (consciously) *in response to* our trusting him and gives us the conscious experience of his fellowship through God’s Word—the experience Paul calls “the joy of the Holy Spirit.” “You received the word . . . with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6).

This remains true even after we become Christians and have the

Holy Spirit in us. If we want more of the Spirit of God, we must hear more of the Word of God with faith. We must hear his promises, see their blood-bought certainty, value their goodness, and bank on them. That is the way God supplies more of his Spirit. The command in Ephesians 5:18-19, "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," is parallel with the command in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Being filled with the Word of Christ and being filled with the Spirit of Christ are almost the same, because the Spirit comes with joy where the Word is embraced with faith.

In other words, not only does the first act of faith come by hearing, but all subsequent acts of faith come by hearing. And since God supplies his Spirit through this "hearing with faith," the fullness of the Spirit comes by the ongoing hearing of the Word of God. And when the Spirit comes, he comes to make much of Jesus. Which means he comes to ignite joy in our hearts over the glory of Jesus. Which means the Word of God is worth more than anything this world can offer.

3. The Word of God creates and sustains *life*.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). To that end he taught many things, and then gave his life so that we might have life, eternal and abundant. We are born again into new life by the Word of God. "You have been *born again*, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23-25). God makes the preaching of the gospel the occasion for creating new life in the soul of man. "The words that I have spoken to you," Jesus said, "are spirit and *life*" (John 6:63). Therefore when John had finished recording the words and works of Jesus in his Gospel he said, "These are written so that you may . . . have *life* in his name" (John 20:31). The words of John's Gospel—and all the Scriptures—lead to life.

Jesus said, "Man shall not *live* by bread alone, but by every *word* that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Oh, how easily we are deceived into thinking that better life, or more life, comes from things that lure us from the Word. But, in fact, it is the Word itself that gives us life abundantly. The life we get from bread is fragile and short. The life we

get from the Word is firm and lasts forever. That life is created and kept by the Word of God. And with that life comes the light of life, by which we see the glory of Christ. “With you is the fountain of *life*; in your light do we see *light*” (Ps. 36:9). Or as Jesus said, “Whoever follows me . . . will have the *light of life*” (John 8:12). In other words, the life that comes from the Word is a life of joy, because the Word brings us from the darkness of impending sorrow to the light of the glory of Christ.

4. The Word of God gives *hope*.

In more ways than we can imagine the Word of God gives and strengthens our hope. We get a glimpse of how many ways the Bible gives hope when we hear Paul’s astonishing assessment of the Old Testament alone: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have *hope*” (Rom. 15:4). Not just part of the Old Testament, but all of it—“whatever was written in former days”—was written with the divine design to give us hope.

One of the things this teaches us is that we have not begun to know all the ways it is possible to get hope. We have very small experience in life compared to God’s wisdom. There are a thousand ways that God has designed to give us hope. Most of them we have not yet tasted or even conceived. Yet how often we murmur that the few proven ways we get hope are missing! We do not realize that there are ways to get hope that we have never thought of. How small-minded of us in our hopelessness to look at our closed Bible and say, “What I need is _____, and this is not in the Bible.” How do we know we need _____ and not some utterly unexpected hope that the Bible will awaken in us when we read it in faith?

Indeed, we may lack hope because we think we need something we do not need. It may take the Word of God to show us what we really need, and then to give us the power to get it. In the end what we really need is Christ. He is the sum of all our hopes. Paul commends the Thessalonians for their “steadfastness of *hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thess. 1:3). He says that our “blessed *hope* [is] the appearing of the *glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*” (Tit. 2:13). Therefore we are to “*hope in Christ*” (Eph. 1:12) and rejoice in the mystery of the gospel, which is “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col. 1:27).

Sometimes what we need from the Bible is not the fulfillment of our dream, but the swallowing up of our failed dream in the all-satisfying glory of Christ. We do not always know the path of deepest joy. But all Scripture is inspired by God to take us there. Therefore Scripture is worth more than all this world can offer.

5. The Word of God leads us to *freedom*.

Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). The truth of God’s Word works freedom in many ways and brings joy in all of them. But Jesus signals his focus in verse 34: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits *sin* is a slave to sin.” The freedom he has in mind here is freedom from the enslaving, destructive effect of sin. The truth sets us free from this. So Jesus turns this truth into a prayer in John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” *Sanctify* means to make holy, or free from sin.

This freedom is essential in the fight for joy for two reasons. One is that the *guilt* of sin would bring down the wrath of God on us if *the truth* of the gospel did not set us free from condemnation through the blood and righteousness of Christ. That’s what we focused on in Chapter Six.

The other reason this freedom is essential in the fight for joy is that sin so defiles and corrupts our lives that we cannot see or savor what is best. Therefore, the corruption of sin is a great joy-killer. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). We devoted Chapter Five to the way that seeing God functions in the fight for joy. Here, suffice it to say that the impurity of sin so distorts our perception that we cannot see God as desirable. Therefore sin makes the greatest joys impossible.

SIN’S SUBSTITUTE PROMISES: DECEITFUL PLEASURES

Of course, sin provides deceptive substitutes. The Bible calls them “deceitful desires” (Eph. 4:22), because they lie to us about the superiority of their outcomes. They call sweet sour, and sour sweet. They turn everything upside down. And those who believe them become more and more like them. “Their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). Oh, how many people in our world glory in their shame and relish poisonous pleasures!

“Deceitful desires” can trick us into feeling that sinful thoughts and acts will be more satisfying than seeing God. This illusion is so strong it creates moral confusion, so that people find ways to justify sin as good, or, if not good, at least permissible. How many marriages have been destroyed by the self-justifying arguments that flow not from the truth of God’s Word, but from “deceitful desires”!

Oh, how urgent the battle becomes when the “deceitful desires” are the strongest. Jesus uses his most violent language for the frontline battle against deceitful desire. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:29). Jesus calls for violence against our own lust because he loves our true and lasting joy. Sexual desire is one of the most powerful deceivers about where that joy can be found. Even pastors by the thousand have been turned into fools who cannot tell their right hand from their left because of a woman’s tenderness.

THE CHRISTIAN “MEAN STREAK” IN SELF-CONTROL

Ed Welch has written powerfully about the “all-out war” demanded against deceitful desires:

... there is a mean streak to authentic self-control. . . . Self-control is not for the timid. When we want to grow in it, not only do we nurture an exuberance for Jesus Christ, we also demand of ourselves a hatred for sin. . . . The only possible attitude toward out-of-control desire is a declaration of all-out war. . . . There is something about war that sharpens the senses . . . You hear a twig snap or the rustling of leaves and you are in attack mode. Someone coughs and you are ready to pull the trigger. Even after days of little or no sleep, war keeps us vigilant.³

Yes, there is a mean, violent streak in the true Christian life! But violence against whom, or what? Not other people! It’s a violence against all the impulses in us that would be violent to other people. It’s a violence against all the impulses in our own selves that would make peace with our own sin and settle in with a peacetime mentality. It’s a violence against all lust in ourselves and all enslaving desires for food or caffeine

or sugar or chocolate or alcohol or pornography or money or the praise of men and the approval of others or power or fame. It's a violence against the impulses in our own soul toward racism and sluggish indifference to injustice and poverty and abortion.

Christianity is not a settle-in-and-live-at-peace-with-this-world-the-way-it-is kind of religion. When Jesus said, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32), he didn't mean without a battle. He meant that truth would win the war of liberation in the soul. Christianity is war. It is a declaration of all-out combat against our own sinful impulses. The apostle Peter said, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which *wage war* against your soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). To become a Christian is to wake up to the reality that our soul—the eternal joy of our soul—is at stake. Therefore, Christianity is mortal combat for true and lasting joy.

THE LIBERATING POWER OF THE WORD IS THE POWER OF PROMISED JOY

Jesus would set us free from the deadly illusions of worldly satisfaction. And he would do so by the truth of his Word. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." So how does the truth of the Word set us free from deceitful desires, so that we can have deeper, stronger, sweeter, higher, longer joy than anything Satan or this world can offer?

Some Christians take the path of stoicism in the fight against sensuality. It doesn't work. It's not biblical. It is hopelessly weak and ineffective. And the reason it fails is that the power of sin comes from its promise of pleasure and is meant to be defeated by the blood-bought promise of superior pleasure in God, not by raw human willpower. Willpower religion, when it succeeds, gets glory for the will. It produces legalists, not lovers. Jonathan Edwards saw the powerlessness of this approach and said:

We come with double forces against the wicked, to persuade them to a godly life. . . . The common argument is the profitableness of religion, but alas, the wicked man is not in pursuit of profit; 'tis pleasure he seeks. Now, then, we will fight with them with their own weapons.⁴

In other words, a passion for blood-bought, everlasting pleasure in God is the only power that can defeat the lusts of the age while producing lovers of God, not legalists who boast in their willpower.

This is how the truth of God's Word sets us free. It gives us the weapon with which we kill deceitful desires. Just as Jesus spoke of violence in the battle against desire, so does Paul: "*Put to death* therefore what is earthly in you . . . evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). And in another place he says, "If by the Spirit you *put to death* the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). The fact that one text says put to death *desires* and another says put to death *deeds* simply shows that behind evil deeds are evil desires. It would do no good just to kill the deed and leave the desire. That is not the way of Jesus. Jesus' way is: Put to death the deed by putting to death the desire. Strangle the deed by cutting off its air supply—namely, the deceit that it will bring us lasting joy.

Both Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:5 say, "Kill!" This is mortal combat, and our lives—not to mention our joy—hang on it. Jesus and Paul agree: This is war. Christianity would look very different in many places if Christians pursued the joy of seeing God with this life-and-death seriousness and felt a deadly urgency in fighting the desires that deceive us and blind us to the all-satisfying glory of God.

HOW DO YOU KILL A DECEITFUL DESIRE?

How then does the truth of God's Word help us kill deceitful desires and set us free for solid joys? One key is to notice that Romans 8:13 says that the deceitful desires and deeds that threaten our life are to be killed "by the Spirit." How do you put to death a desire "by the Spirit"? First, by noticing that the one and only offensive weapon in Paul's description of "the armor of God" in Ephesians 6:11-18 (the weapon used for killing) is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." So when Romans 8:13 says that we should kill sinful deeds "by the Spirit," I take it to mean, "Experience the deceit-destroying power of the Spirit by believing in the Word of God concerning that deceitful desire." Even though we are mere humans and not God, we are to discharge (like a cannon) the power of the Spirit against sinful desires. This deadly fire-

power (= the sword) is called “the word of God.” I take it that our way of discharging this power is by believing this Word.

This is confirmed by Galatians 3:5: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” In other words, we bring the power of the Spirit into vigorous, sin-killing action by *hearing with faith*. Hearing what? The Word of God. Therefore, the way we destroy deceitful, joy-killing desires that threaten to overwhelm us with destructive cravings is to hear and believe the Word of God when it says that he and his ways are more to be desired than all that sin can offer.

This is what Edwards meant when he said, “Now, then, we will fight with them with their own weapons.” The power of sin is the promise of deceitful desires? Then we will match promise for promise! Go ahead, sin, put up your best promises! We will put God’s promises against yours. Nothing—nothing in this world—can surpass in value and depth and height and durability the pleasure that God promises. “Blessed [happy!]⁵ are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). “You give them drink from the river of your delights” (Ps. 36:8). “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound” (Ps. 4:7). “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven” (Luke 6:23). Nothing surpasses the joy God promises.

The fight for joy is the fight to see and believe Christ as more to be desired than the promises of sin. This faith and sight come by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. We look to the Word, we ponder, and we plead with God that the eyes of our hearts would be opened to see the superior glory and joy. This pleading is so important we will devote the whole of Chapter Nine to it. But suffice it to say for now that we are utterly dependent on the Spirit to make the promises of God more desirable to us than the promises of sin. And for that vital eye-opening, heart-changing work we pray every day.

HOW THE CROSS OF CHRIST KILLS JOY-KILLING SIN

But let’s be even more focused in how the truth sets us free from deceitful, joy-killing desires. Not only does the Word of God have promises

perfectly suited to kill each deceitful desire,⁶ it also has a central message designed to have special power in this battle. The central message is the gospel of Christ crucified. We spent all of Chapter Six on this. But I saved the witness of John Owen for this decisive place. Owen (1616-1683) was probably the greatest thinker and theologian among the Puritans in England. He combined deep biblical reflection with penetrating practical application.

One of his most famous works is but eighty-six pages long. It's called *Mortification of Sin in Believers*. "Mortify" means "kill" in seventeenth-century English. The whole book is an exposition of Romans 8:13 ("If by the Spirit you put to death [kill] the deeds of the body, you will live"). Owen put it like this: "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."⁷

My mother wrote in my Bible when I was fifteen years old—I still have the Bible—"This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book." The point I am trying to make right now is that my mother's motto and Owen's motto, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you," are virtually the same. The Word of God is the instrument for killing sin. The truth will set you free. For Owen the cross of Christ was the central message and sin-killing power of the Word of God. It was the central, liberating truth. To focus here, he said, is the main way to kill the sin that kills our joy.

As to the object of your affections, in an especial manner, let it be the cross of Christ, which has exceeding efficacy towards the disappointment of the whole work of indwelling sin: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14). The cross of Christ he [Paul] gloried and rejoiced in; this his heart was set upon; and these were the effects of it—it crucified the world unto him, made it a dead and undesirable thing. *The baits and pleasures of sin are taken all of them out of the world. . . .* If the heart be filled with the cross of Christ, *it casts death and undesirableness upon them all; it leaves no seeming beauty, no appearing pleasure or comeliness, in them.* Again, says he, "It crucifies me to the world; makes my heart, my affections, *my desires, dead unto any of these things.*" It roots up corrupt lusts and affections, leaves no principle to go forth and make provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof. *Labor, therefore, to fill your hearts with the cross of Christ . . .* that there may be no room for sin.⁸

This is the heart of the battle in the fight for joy. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free—free to see the surpassing glory of Christ, free from the blinding, joy-killing desires that make war on the soul. In the fight for joy, there is no replacement for the liberating power of truth—the truth of God's promises and the word of the cross, where all the promises were blood-bought by the death of Christ.

6. The Word of God is the key to *answered prayer*.

Another benefit of the Word of God that wakens desire to read and ponder and memorize Scripture is the role it plays in answered prayer. Jesus said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). The words of Jesus must abide in us if our prayers are to be effective.

The best way to see what it means for the words of Jesus to abide in us is to look at what Jesus says about abiding a few verses earlier. In verse 5 he says, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” Notice the parallel. In verse 7 he says, “If you abide in me, and *my words* abide in you,” and in verse 5 he says, “Whoever abides in me and *I* in him. . . .” In verse 5 *Jesus himself* abides in us when we abide in him. But in verse 7 *his words* abide in us when we abide in him. I think the point of this switch is to show us how Jesus abides in us, namely, by his words abiding in us.⁹

But this parallel also sheds light on what it means for the words of Jesus to abide in us. Letting the words of Jesus abide in us means letting Jesus himself abide in us, to us. It means that we welcome Jesus into our lives and make room for him to live, not as a silent guest with no opinions or commands, but as an authoritative guest whose words and priorities and principles and promises matter more to us than anything does.

What that means for letting the words of Jesus abide in us is that we do not just read or memorize or meditate or listen to the Bible the way we would ponder the wise sayings from ancient teachers. Jesus is alive today, but they aren't. He does not intend for our *thinking* about his words to replace *fellowship* with him through his words. He intends for musing on his words to *be* fellowship with him. We hear the words of Jesus as living words spoken by a living person. It is a spiritually intentional act of relating to a living person when you take his words into your mind. This is what it means for his words to abide in us.

HOW DOES THE ABIDING WORD OF CHRIST LEAD TO EFFECTIVE PRAYERS?

The reason the abiding of Christ's words in us results in answered prayer is that it changes us into the kind of people who love what he loves, so that we ask for things according to his will. This is not absolute. It is progressive. The more we know the living Christ by communion with him in his Word, the more our desires become spiritual like his desires, instead of just worldly. This is what David meant when he said in Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." The desires of the heart cease to be merely natural desires when the heart delights above all else in the Lord. Delighting in the Lord—in the hallowing of his name and the seeking of his kingdom and the doing of his will—transforms all natural desires into God-related desires. That is what happens when the Word of Christ abides in us.

Another way of saying it is, if you want God to respond to your interests, you must be devoted to his interests. God is God. He does not run the world by hiring the consulting firm called Mankind. He lets us share in the running of the world through prayer to the degree that we live in fellowship with him and are gladly shaped by his heart and goals and purposes.

One evidence for this is 1 John 5:14, "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that *if we ask anything according to his will* he hears us." Prayer is not for gratifying our natural desires. It is for gratifying our desires when those desires have been so purified and so saturated with Christ and his Word that they coincide with his plans. This happens more and more as the Word of Christ abides in us.

The words of Jesus abiding in us prepare us for fruit-bearing prayer. "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (John 15:5). If prayer is not for gratifying natural desires but for Christ-exalting fruit-bearing, the major challenge in praying is to become the kind of person who is not dominated by natural desires, but by spiritual fruit-bearing desires. The aim is to become what Paul calls a "spiritual person," as opposed to a merely "natural person" or carnal person (1 Cor. 2:14-15). The key to praying with power is to become the kind of persons who do not use God for our ends but are utterly devoted to being used for his ends.

This is why Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." The words of

Jesus abiding in us make us the kind of persons who are not dominated by merely natural desires, but are devoted to fruit-bearing for God's glory. If you ever longed for a life of deep and fruitful prayer, give yourself to the Word of God. Read it. Think about it. Memorize it. Be shaped by it.

*When saturated by the Word,
More surely will our prayers be heard.*

And since one of those daily prayers will be, "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Ps. 90:14), the words of Jesus are more to be desired than all that this world can offer.

7. The Word of God is the source of *wisdom*.

It is a great advantage to be wise. Wisdom is different from the mere knowledge of facts. Some very wise people have little formal education. And some very educated people, who know many facts, are not wise. Wisdom is the insight and sense of how to live in a way that accomplishes the goals for which we were made: the glory of God and the good of man. And since glorifying God involves delighting in God, and the good of man involves sharing our joy in God, therefore wisdom is the only path to deep and lasting joy.

It won't surprise us that this joy-producing wisdom comes through the Word of God. We just saw in the preceding section that Christ himself abides in us when his words abide in us, and Paul tells us that "in [him] are hidden all the treasures of *wisdom* and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). So by his Word he dwells in us, and with him come "all the treasures of wisdom." Paul says it more directly in Colossians 3:16, "Let the *word of Christ* dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another *in all wisdom*." The Word of Christ brings "all wisdom" into our lives so that we can help each other know it and live in it.

One of the challenges I repeatedly hold out to the people of our church—especially the women—is that they make it one of their aims to age into a sage. I love the vision of older women full of seasoned spiritual fruit that comes only with long life and much affliction and deep meditation on the Word of God. So many younger women yearn for older women, who are deeply wise, to share the wisdom God has taught

them over the years. The joy of giving and receiving this kind of gift is great. It is joy that comes by the Word of God. There is no better joy than what comes through wisdom. Therefore, the Word of God is more valuable than anything on earth.

8. The Word of God gives us crucial *warnings*.

Psalm 19 celebrates the benefits of the Word of God as explicitly as any other Scripture. It comes to a climax like this: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, *by them is your servant warned*; in keeping them there is great reward” (vv. 10-11).

If we had perfect sight of what is wrong and right, and if we could know the future and the consequences of all behavior and all events, then perhaps we would need no warnings. But we are blind to many things and do not know the future, as God does. We need to be warned often that the step we are about to take is folly. Oh, how many joy-killing choices we are spared when we heed the warnings of the Bible! Mercifully God has given us a book that not only points us to the right path but sounds warnings when we are about to take the wrong one.

Warnings are humbling. They save our lives at the cost of our egos. My wife has saved my life several times. Once in Cambridge, England, where cars drive on the left side of the road, I was crossing a city street in front of our hotel. I made it to the middle of the street, and then my alertness failed me, and I looked to my right to see if cars were coming. All clear. Noël must have read my muscles, because in the split second when I was about to make a dash, she called out in a voice that clearly meant *stop*, “Johnny!” My body reacted instinctively to the warning as a car passed *from my left* perhaps three feet in front of me doing maybe thirty miles an hour. If she had not sounded the warning (firmly, with no frills), I do believe I would be either dead today or crippled.

I was given my life by a warning. The Bible is full of life-giving, joy-preserving warnings. How many people with venereal diseases would have been spared by heeding the warning, “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18)! How many people with lung cancer would have been spared by heeding the warning not to be enslaved by anything, including nicotine (1 Cor. 6:12)! How many people would not be in prison if they had heeded the warning, “You shall not murder,” or, “You shall not

steal,” or, “You shall not bear false witness” (Ex. 20:13, 15, 16)! How many have ruined their lives by neglecting the crystal-clear warning, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. . . . It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:9-10)!

How merciful are the warnings of the Word of God! They are the source of untold joy for those who see in them the good heart of the Great Physician. He knows the prevention and the remedy for every sorrow. Does your desire goes deeper and last longer than what the world can offer? Then go to the Word of God and get good warnings.

9. The Word of God enables us to *defeat the devil*.

The devil is real and terrible. He is much stronger than we are, and he aims to deceive and destroy. Jesus said, “He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Yet he has been decisively defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Bible teaches that Christ took on himself human nature so “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). The destruction was decisive, though not final. Because of Christ’s shed blood for our sins, the devil cannot destroy those who are in Christ. The reason is that his accusations are no longer valid. The only thing that could sentence us to eternal destruction is unforgiven sin. But the cross obtained complete forgiveness. Therefore, the devil can only kill us, but not damn us.

Yes, he has that much power. Jesus said to the church in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. *Be faithful unto death*, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Where is the victory in that? John tells us in Revelation 12:11: “And they have conquered [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” By trusting Jesus’ blood to cover all their sins, and by holding on to their faith even to death, they conquered the devil.

The devil is conquered wherever his design to devour faith is defeated. That defeat is by the cross of Christ and the Word of God. John, who knew

the devil's workings so well, said in his first letter, "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14). The Word of God is the power that overcomes the devil. So it was with Jesus in the wilderness. To every temptation thrown at him by the devil, he quoted Scripture (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). If Jesus was himself the Word of God, and could command demons so that they obey him (Mark 1:27), and yet he depended on Scripture to deflect the temptations of the devil, so should we.

It's true, Paul says: "In all circumstances take up the *shield of faith*, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16). So *faith* is the great devil-defeater. "Resist him, firm *in your faith*" (1 Pet. 5:9). But faith in what? The Word of God. The promises of God. Therefore Paul instructs Timothy, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but . . . able to *teach* . . . *correcting* his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of *the truth*, and they may *escape from the snare of the devil*, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:24-26). Teaching is the most common instrument that God uses to deliver "from the snare of the devil." Teaching what? "Knowledge of the truth"—the Word of God.

Therefore, if you would have power over the devil, and if you would escape the snare of his deceit and the destruction of your faith, then do what Jesus did and what all the triumphant saints have done: Treasure up the Word of God, and wield it like a sword against your foe.

*And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.*

When the powers of darkness are arrayed against you, and aim to destroy your joy forever, nothing is more precious than to have the Word of God ready for the battle. The fight for joy is not for the unarmed.

10. The Word of God is, therefore, the source of great and lasting joy.

We have seen at least nine reasons why this is so. Now we see that God, in the Bible, simply says it is so. The wise and godly man turns away from the counsel of the wicked with all their promises of pleasure and finds that “his *delight* is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (Ps. 1:2-3). The lovers of God’s Word praise the preciousness of the Bible and the pleasures it brings. They say that it surpasses the most valuable earthly things, gold and silver; and they say its taste on the tongue of the mind and heart is sweeter than honey, and that its richness is like the finest food.

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Ps. 119:72)

I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. (Ps. 119:162)

I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold. (Ps. 119:127)

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. (Ps. 119:103)

I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food. (Job 23:12)

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. (Jer. 15:16)

The great conclusion is: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97). Which leads us to the question: If the Word of God is this pleasant in itself, and if it is this crucial in the fight for joy—if it is more valuable than anything on earth—how shall we use it? That is the focus of the next chapter.

*Oh how I love your law!
It is my meditation all the day.*

PSALM 119:97

I have thought I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen. I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book].

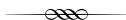
JOHN WESLEY

“PREFACE TO SERMONS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, 1746”

*The Works of John Wesley*¹

How to Wield the Word in the Fight for Joy

Musing, Memorizing, and the Message of God



If the Bible, with the cross of Christ at its center, is more valuable than anything else on earth, then we should be serious about how we use it in the fight for joy. We should be like Wesley, quoted on the facing page, and like Charles Spurgeon, when he said, “It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you.”² So in this chapter my aim is to give practical counsel on how to do this. My prayer is that the preciousness of the Bible would become the measure of our passion for its place in our hearts.

THE PARADOX OF PLANNING AND SPONTANEITY

First, I would stress the importance of planning. I don’t mean any elaborate, lifelong vision. I mean something as simple as, when you finish with this chapter, take three minutes to ask for God’s help, and to consider your schedule, and to pick out a time to read your Bible, and then write it down somewhere so that you remember to do it. Many good things do not happen in our lives for the simple lack of planning.

Consultants get paid thousands of dollars to tell executives the obvi-

ous, because the obvious is neglected. It's the same with all of us. We fail to do what's best for us for lack of serious intention to do it. Another name for serious intention is planning. Most Christians neglect their Bibles not out of conscious disloyalty to Jesus, but because of failure to plan a time and place and method to read it.

The result is not spontaneity, but the same old rut. If your longing is to be spontaneous in the way you commune with God, then build discipline into your Bible reading and prayer. It sounds paradoxical. But it's no more so than the paradox of corn spontaneously growing in a Minnesota field because of the farmer's discipline of plowing and sowing and guarding the field. He doesn't make the corn grow. God does. But God uses his farming disciplines as part of the process. The rich fruit of spontaneity grows in the garden that is well tended by the discipline of schedule.

So I say again, plan a place and a time when you will read the Bible and think about it each day. There can always be more times during the day. There should be. But let there be one sacred time and place. Put it on your calendar. Treat it the same way you would an appointment with a partner or friend. If someone asks you to do something during that time, say, "I'm sorry, I already have an appointment then."

IN GENERAL, EARLY MORNING IS BEST

I earnestly recommend that it be in the early morning, unless there are some extenuating circumstances.³ Entering the day without a serious meeting with God, over his Word and in prayer, is like entering the battle without tending to your weapons. It's like taking a trip without filling the tires with air or the tank with gas. The human heart does not replenish itself with sleep. The body does, but not the heart. The spiritual air leaks from our tires, and the gas is consumed in the day. We replenish our hearts not with sleep, but with the Word of God and prayer. Thousands of saints have discovered through the centuries that starting the day by filling the mind with the Word of God will bring more joy and more love and more power than traveling on yesterday's gas.

FIND A PLACE OF SECLUSION, OR MAKE IT BY RULE

Pick a place of seclusion. If you try to read your Bible and pray where people are moving about, the powers of darkness will exploit that poten-

tial for distraction with all their might. Don't think it has to be comfy. In fact, comfy will probably put you to sleep. It needs to be secluded so that you are not distracted, and so that you can speak out loud and sing and cry. You will cry sooner or later—when you are wrestling for the soul of your teenager, or struggling to keep your marriage together, or laboring to kill the pride in your life. You need to be alone.

If your family situation or home does not have such a place, then create it, not by space, but by rule. That is, arrange that the children or the spouse or the roommates will not speak to you during the appointed time. One saintly mother with a large brood of children would use her apron to make a tent for her head and her Bible at the kitchen table, and the children were taught, when mother is in her tent, make no noise.

PLAN HOW YOU WILL READ YOUR BIBLE

Besides planning for the place and time, plan *how* you will read your Bible. There are many ways to read the Bible. Any is better than none. Coming to the appointed place and time with no plan for how to read the Bible usually results in a hit-and-miss approach that leaves you feeling weak, unreal, and discouraged.

For many years I have read through the Bible once each year following “The Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan.”⁴ The month is May as I write this chapter, and I have just read this morning sections from Mark, Galatians, Psalms, and 2 Samuel. The design is to read daily from two Old Testament and two New Testament books. I find this variety helpful. Others don't, and would rather use some other approach.⁵ That's fine. The one great benefit of “The Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan” is that it gives you assignments for only twenty-five days out of the month. This means that any failures to keep up can be overcome each month in the makeup days. This is a wonderful dose of realism for the average sinful reader (including me). And if you are already up-to-date at the end of twenty-five days, then you have five or six days to do special memory work or to read some other part of the Bible that you have been missing.

HOW GEORGE MUELLER FOUGHT FOR JOY

One of the greatest witnesses I know of to the power of regular disciplined reading of the Bible for the sake of love-producing joy is George

Mueller (1805-1898), who is famous for founding orphanages in Bristol, England, and for depending on God for meeting all his needs. He asked the very question this book is asking, and he gave the same answer:

In what way shall we attain to this settled happiness of soul? How shall we learn to enjoy God? How shall we obtain such an all-sufficient soul-satisfying portion in him as shall enable us to let go the things of this world as vain and worthless in comparison? I answer, This happiness is to be obtained through the study of the Holy Scriptures. God has therein revealed Himself unto us in the face of Jesus Christ.⁶

That's what we have seen so far in this book: Happiness in God comes from seeing God revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ through the Scriptures. Mueller says, "In them . . . we become acquainted with the character of God. Our eyes are divinely opened to see what a lovely Being God is! And this good, gracious, loving, heavenly Father is ours—our portion for time and for eternity."⁷ Knowing God is the key to being happy in God.

The more we know of God, the happier we are. . . . When we became a little acquainted with God . . . our true happiness . . . commenced; and the more we become acquainted with him, the more truly happy we become. What will make us so exceedingly happy in heaven? It will be the fuller knowledge of God.⁸

Therefore the most crucial means of fighting for joy in God is to immerse oneself in the Scriptures where we see God in Christ most clearly. When he was seventy-one years old, Mueller spoke to younger believers:

Now . . . I would give a few hints to my younger fellow-believers as to the way in which to keep up spiritual enjoyment. It is absolutely needful . . . we should read regularly through the Scriptures, consecutively, and not pick out here and there a chapter. If we do, we remain spiritual dwarfs. I tell you so affectionately. For the first four years after my conversion I made no progress, because I neglected the Bible. But when I regularly read on through the whole with reference to my own heart and soul, I directly made progress. Then my peace and joy continued more and more. Now I have been doing this for 47 years. I have read through the whole Bible about 100 times and I always find it fresh when I begin again. Thus my peace and joy have increased more and more.⁹

He would live and read his Bible for another twenty-one years. But he never changed his strategy for satisfaction in God. When he was seventy-six, he wrote the same thing he had learned for over fifty years: "I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord."¹⁰ And the means stayed the same:

I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the word of God, and to meditation on it. . . . What is the food of the inner man? Not prayer, but the word of God; and . . . not the simple reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts.¹¹

THE INDISPENSABLE STRATEGY OF BIBLE MEMORIZATION

How shall we use the Word of God to fight for joy? The first answer I have given is to read it with plan and regularity. The next answer I give is to memorize verses and paragraphs and chapters and even whole books of the Bible. The older you get, the harder it is. I am fifty-eight as I write this, and I still invest significant time in memorizing Scripture, but it is much harder now than it used to be. It takes far more repetition to make the words stick to this aging brain.

But I would not give it up any more than a miser would give up his stash of gold. I feel the same way Dallas Willard does when he says:

Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization, because it is a fundamental way of filling our mind with what it needs. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth. That's where you need it! How does it get in your mouth? Memorization.¹²

The joy-producing effects of memorizing Scripture and having it in my head and heart are incalculable. The world and its God-ignoring, all-embracing secularism is pervasive. It invades my mind every day. What hope is there to have a mind filled with Christ except to have a mind filled with his Word? I know of no alternative.

The Word brings joy directly and indirectly. *Directly* by simply

showing us the beauty of Christ and his ways and all the good things he has promised to be for us forever. *Indirectly* by weaning us off the toxic pleasures of the world by means of the superior pleasures of Christ, so that, in purity of heart, we can see the beauty of Christ more clearly. We discussed how this happens in the previous chapter.

HOW MEMORY HELPS US MAKE WAR

But now observe that memorization suits both these paths of joy. It offers us all day the immediate beauty of Christ in his Word, and it offers us all day the weapons by which we cut the nerve of sin's sweet deception. Memorization corresponds to both paths of joy. First, the direct joy of tasting beauty: "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). Second, the indirect joy through purity: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11).

When you memorize the Word of God, it's there *directly* giving joy to you and (if you speak it) to others, and it's there *indirectly* serving your joy by transforming your mind. How shall we obey the command, "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2) if we neglect to saturate our minds with the thoughts of God? Ask yourself: Of all the spiritually minded people you have known—those who seem to walk most consistently with God and are in tune with God's Spirit—do they not all overflow with Scripture? Are they not like John Bunyan? Prick them, and they bleed Bible.¹³ This is no coincidence. Memorizing Scripture is one of the surest routes to going deep with God and walking in communion with him. Which means walking in joy.

One of the greatest scenes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* is when Christian recalls in the dungeon of Doubting-Castle that he has a key to the door. Very significant is not only what the key is, but where it is:

"What a fool I have been, to lie like this in a stinking dungeon, when I could have just as well walked free. In my chest pocket I have a key called Promise that will, I am thoroughly persuaded, open any lock in Doubting-Castle." "Then," said Hopeful, "that is good news. My good brother, do immediately take it out of your chest pocket and try it." Then Christian took the key from his chest and began to try the lock of the dungeon door; and as he turned the key, the bolt unlocked

and the door flew open with ease, so that Christian and hopeful immediately came out.¹⁴

Three times Bunyan says that the key out of Doubting-Castle was in Christian's "*chest* pocket" or simply his "chest." I take this to mean that Christian had hidden God's promise in his heart by memorization and that it was now accessible in prison for precisely this reason.

This is how the promises sustained and strengthened Bunyan. He was filled with Scripture. Everything he wrote was saturated with Bible. He pored over his English Bible, which he had most of the time. This is why he could say of his writings, "I have not for these things fished in other men's waters; my Bible and concordance are my only library in my writings."¹⁵

A RADICAL CALL TO MAJOR MEMORIZATION

Let me be very practical and challenge you to do something you perhaps have never done. If you are not a memorizer at all, shift up to memorizing a Bible verse a week.¹⁶ If you only memorize single verses, shift up to memorizing some paragraphs or chapters (like Psalm 1 or Psalm 23 or Romans 8). And if you have ventured to memorize chapters, shift up to memorize a whole book or part of a book. Few things have a greater effect on the way we see God and the world than to memorize extended portions of Scripture.

Andrew Davis, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, has written a very helpful little book called *An Approach to the Extended Memorization of Scripture*.¹⁷ It inspired me in 2001 to tackle the memorizing of Romans 1—8. By God's grace, I made it. Oh, how sweet and how terrible to live so intimately with the greatest truth in the world!

Since then my focus has been on memorizing significant paragraphs and chapters of the Bible rather than whole books. All Bible memory is valuable, whether of verses, chapters, or books. But don't shrink back from the effort to memorize extended portions of Scripture. My own conviction is that a hundred—I dare say a thousand—problems will be solved in your life by memorizing Scripture this way *before* the problems ever come. This is impossible to prove, but I commend it to you for your consideration.

HOW DO YOU MEMORIZE A WHOLE BOOK?

I will borrow Andrew Davis's method and simply give it to you as he gives it in his booklet. It's the method I use.

Sample daily procedure: The following is an example of how someone could go about memorizing Ephesians at the rate of one verse per day:

1) *Day one:* Read Ephesians 1:1 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. **Be sure to include the verse number.**¹⁸ Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

2) *Day two: Yesterday's verse first!!* Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:1 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Now, do your **new verse**. Read Ephesians 1:2 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. **Be sure to include the verse number.** Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

3) *Day three: Yesterday's verse first!!* Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:2 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. **Old verses next, altogether:** Recite Ephesians 1:1-2 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your **new verse**. Read Ephesians 1:3 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. **Be sure to include the verse number.** Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

4) *Day four: Yesterday's verse first!!* Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:3 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. **Old verses next, altogether:** Recite Ephesians 1:1-3 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your **new verse**. Read Ephesians 1:4 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. **Be sure to include the verse number.** Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

This cycle would continue through the entire book. Obviously, the "old verses altogether" stage will soon swell to take the most time of all. That's exactly the way it should be. The entire book of Ephesians can be read at a reasonable rate in less than fifteen minutes. Therefore, the "old verses altogether" stage of your review should not take longer than that on any given day. Do it with the Bible ready at hand, in case you draw a blank or get stuck . . . there's no shame in looking, and it actually helps to nail down troublesome verses so they will never be trouble again.

WHY SO MUCH EMPHASIS ON MEMORIZATION?

I spend this much time on Bible memory because I believe in the power of the indwelling Word of God to solve a thousand problems before they happen, and to heal a thousand wounds after they happen, and to kill a thousand sins in the moment of temptation, and to sweeten a thousand days with the “drippings of the honeycomb.” I am jealous for you, my readers, that you would “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). This is the path to solid joy and all the service of love that it sustains. Christ will be seen as the fortune he is when we treasure his Word more than money, and when the joy it wakens overflows with sacrificial love (2 Cor. 8:2).

THE WORD OF GOD, A PAD OF PAPER, A DAY AWAY

Another suggestion I would make is that you plan to take periodic retreats with nothing but the Word of God and a pad of paper and pen (and perhaps a hymnal). This may be for a Saturday morning, or a weekend, or for several days. The aim is to free yourself from the press and hurry of the world, in order to see more of Christ, because of the unique focus of those hours. Some of the richest times with God I ever spent have been the extended hours alone simply to read long stretches of the Bible and pray. I recall one very powerful time that stands out from years ago when I was out of town by myself and decided in my lonely apartment to spend the morning reading the Gospel of Mark at one sitting, praying as I read.

Wesley Duewel, in his book *Let God Guide You Daily*, describes what it is like for him to seek God in a retreat of solitude: “I have at times read as many as fifty chapters from God’s Word before I was completely alone with God. But on some of those occasions I received such unexpected guidance that my life has been greatly benefited.”¹⁹ When I read this, I had to ask, as I am sure you do: Have I ever read fifty chapters of the Bible in one day? What blessings and joys might await those who are hungry enough to take a day for such a thing?

THERE ARE EYES IN PENCILS AND IN PENS

I mentioned that you might want to take a pad and pen on such a retreat. In fact I would say, always keep a pad and pen nearby when you read the Bible. I have often counseled people who tell me that they don’t see anything when they read the Bible, “Go home and this time, write the

text, instead of just reading it. If anything stands out as helpful, make a mark and write down your ideas about it. Keep writing till you are done with that insight. Then keep reading and writing the text till you see something else to write about, or until you are out of time.”

The main value in this is that writing forces us to slow down and see what we are reading. Some of us have very bad habits of passive reading that certain types of formal education have bred into us, by forcing us to read quickly when we ought to be reading slowly—thinking as we go. Writing is a way of slowing us down and opening our eyes to see what we do not otherwise see. This struck me so forcefully one day that I paused and wrote:

*I know not how the light is shed,
Nor understand this lens.
I only know that there are eyes
In pencils and in pens.*

LEARNING TO MUSE OVER THE WORD OF GOD

This suggestion that you write what you read, and that you take notes, is moving us toward what is usually called meditation. Memorizing and reading slowly with pen in hand are ways of making meditation possible. And meditation is crucial in the fight for joy. God commanded Joshua that a leader must be ever musing on the Word of God: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate on it day and night*” (Josh. 1:8). The scroll was rare and precious. Joshua did not have a “pocket scroll” to carry around. This means that God made memory and meditation part of what it took to lead his people. The same is true today.

This was not a burden to the saints of old: “Oh how I love your law! It is my *meditation* all the day. . . . I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my *meditation*” (Ps. 119:97, 99). “His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he *meditates day and night*” (Ps. 1:2). “My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may *meditate* on your promise” (Ps. 119:148). “I remember the days of old; I *meditate* on all that you have done; I *ponder* the work of your hands” (Ps. 143:5). “On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will *meditate*” (Ps. 145:5).

Now what does this meditation involve? The word *meditation* in Hebrew means basically to speak or to mutter. When this is done in the heart, it is called musing or meditation. So meditating on the Word of God day and night means to speak to yourself the Word of God day and night and to speak to yourself about it—to mull it over, to ask questions about it and answer them from the Scripture itself, to ask yourself how this might apply to you and others, and to ponder its implications for life and church and culture and missions.

One simple way to do this is to memorize a verse or two and then say them to yourself once, emphasizing the first word. Then say them to yourself again, emphasizing the second word. Then say them a third time, emphasizing the third word. And so on, over and over again, until you have meditated on the reason why each word is there. Then you can start asking relational questions. If *this* word is used, why is *that* word used? The possibilities of musing and pondering and meditating are endless. And always we pray as we ponder, asking for God's help and light.

READING SERIOUS BOOKS ABOUT THE BIBLE AND THINKING

I would add here that many of us have made the mistake of thinking that the only kind of meditation that will give rise to joy is the kind that comes easy and involves little hard thinking. Since reading hard books or thinking complex thoughts is usually not accompanied with pleasure for most people, we assume that they are not the path to pleasure. That is a mistake—at least it will prove to be a mistake for many people.

Of course, not all people should read the “great books” of Christian history. Thousands of Christians will not be able to read at all and will do all their meditation from orally received words. Many more will have the kinds of work that keep them laboring from sunup till sundown, and reading will be a luxury for rare snatched hours. Others will live in places and be so poor that there is no access to any books, and perhaps only fragments of the Bible. So please don't take me to mean that everyone must be a reader of great books in order to fight for joy successfully.

However, for thousands of people who read this book, and millions of others like you, I would challenge you to throw off the notion that weighty books of doctrine are joy-squelching, while light devotional books are joy-producing. It's true that the joy of serious reading and the

thinking that goes with it (sometimes called study) may not be as immediate as the joy of singing in church, or seeing a sunset, or talking with a friend, or hearing a preacher with lots of stories. But the payload for joy may be greater. Raking is easier than digging, but you only get leaves. If you dig you may get diamonds.

I have the profound sense that many people who complain of not being able to rejoice in God treat the knowledge of God as something that ought to be easy to get. They are passive. They expect spiritual things to happen to them from out of nowhere. They don't grasp the pattern of the Bible expressed in Proverbs 2:1-6.

If you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Look at all those aggressive words: “receive . . . treasure up . . . make your ear attentive . . . incline your heart . . . call out . . . raise your voice . . . seek . . . search”—*if* you do these, then knowledge of God will be yours. Not because you can make it happen. The giving of the knowledge is still in the hands of God: “For the LORD *gives* wisdom.” No, the pursuit of the knowledge of God is not because you can make it happen, but because God freely chooses to bless seeking with finding. The pattern is seen in 2 Timothy 2:7 where Paul says, “*Think* over what I say, for the Lord will *give* you understanding in everything.” You think. The Lord gives. Our thinking does not replace his giving. And his giving does not replace our thinking.

DOES HARD THINKING CREATE COLD HEARTS?

It is a tragedy that hard thinking has come to be associated with cold hearts. This has not been the experience of the greatest Christian minds. Delight and study have gone hand in hand. “Great are the works of the LORD, *studied* by all who *delight* in them” (Ps. 111:2). The wise English Puritan Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) saw this pattern in the Bible and pleaded with his readers:

Endeavour to preserve and keep up lively, holy, and spiritual affections in thy heart, and suffer them not to cool. . . . For such as your affections such must your thoughts be; . . . Indeed, thoughts and affections are . . . the mutual causes of each other: “Whilst I mused, the fire burned” (Psalm 39:3); so that thoughts are the bellows that kindle and inflame affections; and then if they are inflamed, they cause thoughts to boil.²⁰

Almost all the impulses in American publishing and church life today communicate that fire in the bones will come *not* by doctrine and thinking, but by quick nuggets, accessible stories, light devotional books, and music. C. S. Lewis had a totally different experience, and mine is the same as his.

For my own part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that ‘nothing happens’ when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.²¹

Amen! (Well, with the exception of the pipe!) Of course, there are very bad theology books, just as there are very bad devotional books. Both will dry up your joy in a minute. But one should not stop eating fruit because the last time he tried it was a lemon. Most of the sweet, rich fruit of Christian doctrine is old. Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge. Read the old books. It is a great mistake to think that the great books of old are too hard to understand. C. S. Lewis is right to point out that the greatness of the old writer is this: “The great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator.”²²

The newer the doctrinal books are, the more prevalent is the sad separation between scholarship and manifest passion for Christ. Most evangelicals have bought into the need for apparent indifference in writing about massively important things. It is very sad. Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*²³ is a happy exception, and I recommend it to the average reader as one place where the heart may “sing unbidden” while

working through a tough bit of theology. There are others. And you will not have to pick so carefully if you search among the Puritans.²⁴

WHY SO MUCH TALK ABOUT HUMAN AUTHORS?

Of course, someone may ask, why are you talking about human authors in a chapter on the role of the Word of *God* in the fight for joy? The answer is that God has appointed for us to be helped in our understanding and enjoyment of Scripture by human teachers—living and dead. Clearly he has ordained that there be elders who are “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). What they teach is the Word of God. Therefore God wills that we read and memorize and meditate on the Word of God if we have access to it. But he also wills that we be taught by faithful elders or pastors. Some of these write down their teachings. This is why we have books.

One way to think about Christian books by dead authors is that they are the ministry of the Body of Christ across the centuries, and not just across the miles. We are meant to learn the meaning of Scriptures from Christian teachers out of the pulpit and out of the past. None of us is so free from sin or bias or blindness that we can see the infallible Scriptures infallibly. We need help. We need correction. We need guidance and encouragement. Oh, the wonders that others have seen in the Bible that we have not seen! What a folly and what a blow to joy if we neglect these books! Many of the greatest God-given helpers in our quest for joy are dead. But God has preserved their helpfulness in books.

The best way to guard a true interpretation of Scripture, the Reformers insisted, was neither to naively embrace the infallibility of tradition, or the infallibility of the individual, but to recognize the *communal* interpretation of Scripture. The best way to ensure faithfulness to the text is to read it together, not only with the churches of our own time and place, but with the wider “communion of saints” down through the age.²⁵

WHAT IF YOU READ SLOWLY LIKE ME?

These older works are like reading the Bible through the mind and heart of great knowers and lovers of God. Don't let long books daunt you, like John Calvin's *Institutes*. To be sure, finishing a great book is not as important as growing by it. But finishing it is not as hard as you might think.

Suppose you read slowly like I do—maybe about the same speed that you speak—200 words a minute. If you read fifteen minutes a day for one year (say just before supper, or just before bed), you will read 5,475 minutes in the year. Multiply that by 200 words a minute, and you get 1,095,000 words that you would read in a year. Now an average serious book might have about 360 words per page. So you would have read 3,041 pages in one year. That’s ten very substantial books. All in fifteen minutes a day.

Or, to be specific, my copy of Calvin’s *Institutes* has 1,521 pages in two volumes, with an average of 400 words per page, which is 608,400 words. That means that even if you took a day off each week, you could read this great biblical vision of God and man in less than nine months (about thirty-three weeks) at fifteen minutes a day. The point is: The words and ways of God will abide in you more deeply and more powerfully if you give yourself to some serious reading of great books that are saturated with Scripture. It certainly does not have to be John Calvin—or my favorite, Jonathan Edwards—but not to read any of the great old books when you have access to them may be owing to nothing better than what Lewis calls “chronological snobbery.”²⁶

BEING WITH BIBLE-SATURATED PEOPLE, LIVING AND DEAD

In the fight for joy I would also add this tactic in the overall strategy of using the Word of God. Expose yourself to Bible-saturated people, both the living and the dead. Their lives and their words are a great help to our joy. The *living* are the church that you are a part of. The *dead* are the Body of Christ whose Word-saturated lives reach us through their biographies.

God wills that we strengthen each other’s hands in the fight for joy. Paul said, “We work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). Hebrews tells us: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. *But exhort one another every day*, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:12-13). And Proverbs says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise” (Prov. 13:20). We are not meant to fight for joy alone. Christian joy is a community project.

Just as God ordained that there be teachers, living and dead, so he ordained that the whole Body of Christ speak the Word of God to each

other every day in the fight for joy. “Exhort one another every day.” Specifically, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25). All of us should feel the calling to exhort others with the Word of God. But that’s not my point here. My point here is that you should make sure this is *done to you*. Put yourself in some kind of fellowship, small enough so that this one-another ministry is happening. One of my first questions in dealing with a joyless saint is, “Are you in a small group of believers who care for each other and pray for each other and ‘consider how to stir one another up to love’”? Usually the answer is no.

THE WORD OF GOD IS A COMMUNITY TREASURE

As much as I stress Bible reading, and Bible memorization, and Bible meditation, and reading great books on Bible doctrine, all of that could sound very individualistic. It suits my American bent. But the Word of God is meant to be a community treasure and a community event. It should be alive in the fellowship of believers. This is probably the normal form that the gift of prophecy should take today: anointed, Spirit-guided speaking and application of Scripture in timely ways for each person’s need. That is what we need from each other in the fight for joy. Don’t rest until you have sought out, or called together, a group of believers where this is happening.

Let me be very specific in regard to church membership in the fight for joy. I know it is possible to be a member of a church—that is, to have your name on an official roll—and not be connected to other believers in a way that stirs up spiritual life and joy and obedience. Indeed it is possible to be a member of a local church and not even be a believer. Nevertheless I believe it is the will of Christ for all of his people to be responsible members of Christ-exalting, Bible-believing local churches. This may be impossible in some locations. God knows that and will supply what we need if the normal means of grace are lacking. But in ordinary circumstances Christians should be responsible *members* of a local church.

When the New Testament uses the word *member* to refer to a Christian in relation to a local body of believers, it uses the word first metaphorically. That is, we are members of a local body of believers the

way hands and feet are members of the human body. “As the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (1 Cor. 12:12, 15). This is a picture not of the universal body of Christ, but of the local expression of that body in a specific place. We know this for several reasons.

One reason is that when Paul refers to the universal body of Christ, he says the “head” is Christ himself. “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18; 2:19; Eph. 5:23). But when Paul refers to the local body of believers, he uses the term “head” as just another member, like hand or foot: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again *the head* to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21). Another reason we know that the picture of “membership” in 1 Corinthians 12 is membership in a *local body* of believers, and not just membership in the universal body of Christ, is that it speaks of close relationships of care and responsibility that go with this membership: “God has so composed the body . . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the *members may have the same care for one another*” (1 Cor. 12:24-25). This kind of mutual care is not possible in the universal body of Christ, but only in local expressions of that body.

Therefore, it is clear that the apostle Paul moves beyond the metaphorical use of *member* (hand and foot and head and eye) to the real, personal, responsible membership in a local church. Membership moves from the metaphorical connectedness to real, concrete organizational connectedness that creates the expectation of both care and accountability. This is why Paul can take church discipline so seriously and even speak of the rare cases when a member is put out of the church. “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you’” (1 Cor. 5:12-13). Such a formal *removal* would not be possible if there were no formal membership.

I stress this biblical perspective on church membership because we live in a day when people shun responsibility and accountability. We are very individualistic and resistant to others holding us to any standard that might cross our immediate desires. But God loves us and does not call us to what is bad for us. Church membership is a gift of grace. Like

all relationships (marriage, parenting, employment, teams, citizenship), it has its pain. But, more than most of us realize, it has its life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving effect according to God's plan and mercy. The Christ-displaying, corporate ministry of the Word of God comes to us in church membership in ways that we cannot predict. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing by staying on the edges of Christ's church.

One of the things that gives this corporate ministry of the Word such power is that the Word comes incarnated in real persons. We are not reading pages—we are hearing living persons. Paul pointed to the power of this personal ministry when he said, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God *but also our own selves*, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). When the Word of God, tailored to our need, comes to us in a person who gives us his very self, there is a great triumph of love that almost always leads to joy.

CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY AND THE FIGHT FOR JOY

And even the dead can live in this way. The entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews can be included in the reference to Abel: "And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks" (v. 4). In answer to how we "stir one another up to love," the book of Hebrews answers: through the lives of the living and the dead. "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). A Christian life, whether past or present, is a demonstration of the truth of God's Word and a display of God's grace. Therefore, since the fight for joy is a fight to see and savor all that God is for us, we would be poor warriors not to seek Christian fellowship and read Christian biography.

THE INSPIRATION OF EDWARDS'S FIGHT FOR JOY

My friendship with Jonathan Edwards has grown over the years, though Edwards has been dead since 1758. What I have learned from his words and his works is incalculable. I thank God for him with all my heart. I wrote my tribute to him in *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*.²⁷ His own battle for joy has been a great

inspiration and guidance to my own. For example, he wrote seventy resolutions when he was a young man. Three of them have remained with me over the years in my own fight for joy.

Number 22 says: “*Resolved*, To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.” You can see that he grasped the warfare of joy early on. As a means to that end he said in number 28: “*Resolved*, To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, so that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.” He was preeminently biblical, for all his philosophical powers. And that has helped to keep me riveted on the Word of God. And to put a passion behind this Word-soaked quest for eternal joy, he gave these simple but inspiring words in resolution number 6: “*Resolved*, To live with all my might, while I do live.”²⁸

When you read Christian biography you get to see a person fight for joy over a lifetime. This is tremendously helpful. It gives guidance in the warfare. It gives inspiration because of triumphs of grace. It gives humility and hope because of failures and recoveries. And sometimes there are glimpses of what is possible in relation to God that set a reader to praying and longing as never before. For example, Edwards recalled his experience from the time he was thirty-four:

Once, as I rid out into the woods for my health, *anno* [year] 1737; and having lit [dismounted] from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him;

and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.²⁹

This story freed me in my twenties from the foolish notion that great theology and serious doctrine keep a person from weeping for joy. Ever since then I have rejected the notion that the rigorous effort to *know* more of God must cause one to *feel* less of God.

For the sake of your joy in Christ read Christian biography. It will take you out of yourself and put you in another time and another skin, so that you see Jesus with eyes more full of wonder than your own. Find some Bible-saturated, Christ-exalting, God-centered saints from centuries gone by and learn from them how to fight for joy.

LUTHER'S STRANGE HELPER IN UNDERSTANDING AND ENJOYING SCRIPTURE

The topic of biography gives me a chance to mention one more tactic in how to use the Word of God in the fight for joy. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the great German Reformer, taught me the essential role of suffering in seeing the fullness of Christ in the Scriptures and knowing the fullness of joy.

Luther noticed in Psalm 119 that the writer not only prayed and meditated over the Word of God in order to understand it—he also suffered in order to understand it. The psalmist says, “Before I was *afflicted* I went astray, but now I keep your word. . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Ps. 119:67, 71). An indispensable key to understanding the Scriptures is suffering in the path of righteousness. It is sure that we will all be given this key: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). For some, the Word comes with the key attached: “You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). That’s the way it was for Luther.

He proved the value of trials over and over again in his own experience.

For as soon as God’s Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, will make a real doctor [teacher of doctrine] of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God’s Word.

For I myself . . . owe my papists [Roman Catholic adversaries] many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil's raging, that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached.³⁰

Suffering was woven into life for Luther. Emotionally and spiritually he underwent the most oppressive struggles. For example, in a letter to Melancthon on August 2, 1527, he writes:

For more than a week I have been thrown back and forth in death and Hell; my whole body feels beaten, my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely, driven about on the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God. But because of the intercession of the faithful, God began to take mercy on me and tore my soul from the depths of Hell.³¹

These were the trials that opened his eyes to the meaning of Scripture. These experiences were as much a part of his exegetical labors as was his Greek lexicon. Seeing such things in the lives of the saints has caused me to think twice before I begrudge the trials of my ministry. How often I am tempted to think that the pressures and conflicts and frustrations are simply distractions from the business of ministry and Bible study. Luther (along with Psalm 119:67, 71) teaches us to see it all another way. The stresses of life, the interruptions, the disappointments, the conflicts, the physical ailments, the losses—all of these may well be the very lens through which we see the meaning of God's Word as never before. Paradoxically, the pain of life may open us to the Word that becomes the pathway to joy.

There is more that could be said about how to use the Word of God to fight for joy. Indeed, more will be said in the following chapters. For now, in closing, remember this: The Bible is the Word of a living Person, Jesus Christ, who is our God and Savior. Therefore, read and meditate and memorize with a view to seeing him in the words that he records and the works he recounts. He is as near as your own breathing and is infinitely merciful and mighty.

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

PSALM 90:14

*Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you
will receive, that your joy may be full.*

JOHN 16:24

*I pray, O God, that I may know You and love You, so that I may
rejoice in You. And if I cannot do so fully in this life may I
progress gradually until it comes to fullness. Let the knowledge
of You grow in me here, and there [in heaven] be made complete;
let Your love grow in me here and there be made complete, so
that here my joy may be great in hope, and there be complete in
reality. Lord, by Your Son You command, or rather, counsel us
to ask and You promise that we shall receive so that our 'joy may
be complete.' I ask, Lord, as You counsel through our admirable
counsellor. May I receive what You promise through Your truth
so that my 'joy may be complete.' God of truth, I ask that I may
receive so that my 'joy may be complete.' Until then let my mind
meditate on it, let my tongue speak of it, let my heart love it, let
my mouth preach it. Let my soul hunger for it, let my flesh thirst
for it, my whole being desire it, until I enter into the 'joy of the
Lord,' who is God, Three in One, 'blessed forever. Amen.'*

ANSELM

*Proslogion*¹

The Focus of Prayer in the Fight for Joy

*Desiring All Else Only Because
We Desire God*



What do you do when you don't desire the Word of God? Or when you read it and don't see anything that gives you joy? Or when your joy is weak and disintegrates before the allurements of the world? What do you do if you are not satisfied in the God of the Bible, but prefer the pleasures of the world? Did Paul or the psalmists or the celebrated saints of history ever struggle with this? Yes, they did. And we should take heart. We all struggle with seasons of lukewarmness and spiritual numbness of heart. There are times in the lives of the most godly people when spiritual hunger becomes weak, and darkness threatens to consume the light, and everything but the vaguely remembered taste of joy evaporates.

MARTIN LUTHER'S MISERY

For example, on the outside, to many, Martin Luther looked invulnerable. But those close to him knew the affliction. He wrote to Melancthon from the Wartburg Castle on July 13, 1521, while he was supposedly working feverishly on the translation of the New Testament:

I sit here at ease, hardened and unfeeling—alas! Praying little, grieving little for the Church of God, burning rather in the fierce fires of my

untamed flesh. It comes to this: I *should* be afire in the spirit; in reality I am afire in the flesh, with lust, laziness, idleness, sleepiness. It is perhaps because you have all ceased praying for me that God has turned away from me. . . . For the last eight days I have written nothing, nor prayed nor studied, partly from self-indulgence, partly from another vexatious handicap [constipation and piles (hemorrhoids), we find out in another place]. . . . I really cannot stand it any longer; . . . Pray for me, I beg you, for in my seclusion here I am submerged in sins.²

The spiritual sight of saints is not uniformly clear. Clouds set in, and when the glory of Christ is obscured, the fires of affection may smolder. We will say more about this in Chapter Twelve. Suffice it to say now that these need not be wasted seasons in the life of faith. God has his wise and holy purposes for bringing his loved ones to the brink of despair (see 2 Cor. 1:8-10).

But to go to the valley of darkness, or stay there, is never our aim. The biblical command is, “Rejoice in the Lord.” And even when the Bible commands, “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom” (Jas. 4:9)—even then, the aim is not to stay there. The next verse says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and *he will exalt you*.” “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10). The goal of brokenhearted repentance is the blessing of humble, Christ-exalting joy.

How then do we fight for joy when our desires languish and we may have no inclination for the Word of God? The answer we are focusing on in this chapter is prayer. The key to joy in God is God’s omnipotent, transforming grace, bought by his Son, applied by his Spirit, wakened by the Word, and laid hold of by faith through prayer.

PRAYER: “THE OFFERING UP OF OUR DESIRES UNTO GOD”

How shall we define prayer so that we know what we are talking about? B. B. Warfield recounts a story about D. L. Moody, the nineteenth-century evangelist, making a visit to Britain and learning about the value of the Westminster Catechism in relation to prayer. He was staying with a Scottish friend in London.

A young man had come to speak to Mr. Moody about religious things. He was in difficulty about a number of points, among the rest about prayer and natural laws. "What is prayer?," he said, "I can't tell what you mean by it!" They were in the hall of a large London house. Before Moody could answer, a child's voice was heard singing on the stairs. It was that of a little girl of nine or ten, the daughter of their host. She came running down the stairs and paused as she saw strangers sitting in the hall. "Come here, Jenny," her father said, "and tell this gentleman 'What is prayer.'" Jenny did not know what had been going on, but she quite understood that she was now called upon to say her Catechism. So she drew herself up, and folded her hands in front of her, like a good little girl who was going to "say her questions," and she said in her clear childish voice: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies." "Ah! That's the Catechism!" Moody said, "thank God for that Catechism."³

The central definition of prayer in the Westminster Catechism is "an offering up of our desires unto God." Therefore prayer is the revealer of the heart. What a person prays for shows the spiritual condition of his heart. If we do not pray for spiritual things (like the glory of Christ, and the hallowing of God's name, and the salvation of sinners, and the holiness of our hearts, and the advance of the gospel, and contrition for sin, and the fullness of the Spirit, and the coming of the kingdom, and the joy of knowing Christ), then probably it is because we do not desire these things. Which is a devastating indictment of our hearts.

This is why J. I. Packer said, "I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face."⁴ How we pray reveals the desires of our hearts. And the desires of our hearts reveal what our treasure is. And if our treasure is not Christ, we will perish. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me," Jesus said, "is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37).

THE FIGHT FOR JOY: WORSHIPFUL, LOVING, SERIOUS,
AND DANGEROUS

Therefore, the fight for joy with the weapon of prayer is very serious. Ultimately the glory of God is at stake. This is true because God is most

glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. It is true also because the joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10) in the cause of mercy and justice and missions. For when the light of Christ shines in these ways, people see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Being more satisfied in God than in prosperity or the praise of man makes you willing to be persecuted for the sake of Christ. So it was said of the early Christians, “You *joyfully* accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:34). That is what joy in God (not earthly security) produces. Therefore praying for such liberating joy in God is one of the most worshipful and loving things a person can do. And it is very dangerous.⁵

Praying for joy is not the emotional pampering of joyless people. It is preparation for sacrifice. What’s at stake in the fight for joy is the radiance of the worth of Jesus made visible for the world to see in sacrifices of love flowing from the joy of blood-bought, soul-satisfied, Christ-exalting people. When Paul said to the Corinthians, “We work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24), he was not saying, “We pamper you.” He was saying, “We prepare you for radical, Christ-exalting sacrifices of love.”

WHAT JOY DID IN MACEDONIA

You can see this as clear as day in 2 Corinthians 8:1-4. Paul celebrated what happened to the Christians in Macedonia so that the Corinthians would seek the same thing—namely, the grace of God, which led to joy in God, which led to love. This is a pattern we see over and over again.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. (2 Cor. 8:1-4)

First, there was the power of *grace*. And Paul makes clear that this power is available for the Corinthians, not just the Macedonians: “God

is able to make *all grace* abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8). Then, rising in the heart because of grace, there was “abundance of joy.” This was not because of circumstances or prosperity. It was “in a severe test of affliction,” and it was out of “extreme poverty.” This is not a health, wealth, and prosperity gospel. The joy they had was in Christ, not things. Then, after grace gave rise to abundant joy in Christ, love overflowed. This joy “overflowed in a wealth of generosity” for the poor. And this was not constrained, but free and lavish.

This is serious and dangerous. If you believe that joy is peripheral, and what matters is generosity for the relief of the poor, whether you feel like it or not, you are against the Word of God.⁶ In this same context Paul says, with devastating clarity, “Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). God does not delight in reluctant, disinclined obedience. And we do not feel loved when we are served begrudgingly. Therefore, to labor for a person’s joy in Christ is not pampering. It is preparing him for the most dangerous deeds of love.

PRAYING FOR JOY AND PRAYING FOR ALL ELSE FOR THE SAKE OF JOY

Therefore, we want to follow such persons. So we ask, how did the early Christians pray for joy? First, we may assume that they prayed the prayers of the only Bible that they had, namely, the Old Testament. Thus they would have prayed: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps. 90:14). “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice” (Ps. 51:8). “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Ps. 51:12). “Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us” (Ps. 90:15). “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Ps. 85:6). Don’t miss how radical these prayers are. They assume that we are unable to make ourselves satisfied in God. And they assume that God has the right to do it, is able to do it, and does it in answer to prayer.

Second, the early Christians prayed for joy in accord with the example of the apostles. Paul prayed, “May the God of hope fill you *with all*

joy and peace in believing" (Rom. 15:13), and "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience *with joy*" (Col. 1:11). So the early church looked not only to the Old Testament, but to the emerging New Testament for their mandate to fight for joy by prayer.

Third, they took Jesus at his word when he said, "Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, *that your joy may be full*" (John 16:24). So they did all their asking in the name of Jesus with a view to having full joy in him. Every prayer was based on his blood-bought grace. When every prayer was attended with the words, "In Jesus' name, Amen," it was not empty, worn-out Christian jargon for them.

Paul explained why: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20). In other words, because Christ died in our place, all of God's wrath is averted from us, and only mercy comes to us from heaven (Rom. 5:9; 8:32). That is the ground of all our prayers. They were bought for us by the blood of Christ. Praying in Jesus' name means we believe that and lay claim to answers only because of Christ's righteousness, not ours.

IN ALL PRAYER FOR HIS GIFTS WE ARE PRAYING FOR MORE OF GOD

So in obedience to Christ the early church prayed in Jesus' name, *and* they prayed with the aim Jesus told them to: "that your joy may be full." Every prayer, no matter what it was for, was a prayer for the fullness of joy in Christ. They knew that Christ was not calling the church to exploit God's mercy for material gain. Prayer was for glorifying God and magnifying his Son. "Whatever you ask in my name," Jesus said, "this I will do, *that the Father may be glorified in the Son*" (John 14:13). The early church knew that in the very act of praying, a person might make a lackey out of God by not desiring God but only his gifts. "You ask and do not receive," James said, "because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas. 4:3). It is not wrong to want God's gifts and ask for them. Most prayers in the Bible are for the gifts of God. But ultimately every gift should be desired because it shows us and brings us more of him.

Augustine put it like this in one of his prayers: “He loves thee too little, who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake.”⁷ Every Christ-exalting prayer for the gifts of God is at root a prayer for the glory of Christ. Christ is exalted when he is desired above God’s gifts. “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you” (Ps. 63:3). If his love is better than life, it must be better than all that life can give.

How else can we explain the words of Habakkuk 3:17-18, “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation”? When this world totally fails, the ground for joy remains. God. Therefore, surely every prayer for life and health and home and family and job and ministry in this world is secondary. And the great purpose of prayer is to ask that—in and through all his gifts—God would be our joy.

WATCHING THE EARLY CHURCH PRAY FOR EVERYTHING FOR JOY

It is amazing to see this truth in action in the New Testament. Walk with me for a few minutes among the prayers of the early Christians, and you will see what they prayed for and how all of it was part of the fight for joy in God.

1. The early Christians called on God to exalt his name in the world.

“Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name’” (Matt. 6:9). This is a prayer for joy in two ways. First, to see God’s name honored is the greatest joy of all who love God. Therefore to pray that his name be honored is to pray for what we desire more than anything. Second, since God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, a prayer for his name to be hallowed (glorified) is a prayer that we and millions of others would be more satisfied in him than anything. The psalmists link the joy we have in God with the praise we bring his name. “I will *be glad and exult in you*; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High” (Ps. 9:2).

2. The early Christians called on God to extend his kingdom in the world.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). At the arrival of God’s kingdom in the fullness of its glory, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, *neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore*” (Rev. 21:4). Therefore, to pray for this kingdom to come is to pray for the greatest possible joy to fill the creation.

But not only far in the future. The spiritual triumph of God’s kingdom in the soul and in the church and here and there in the world today is defined explicitly by the apostle Paul as “righteousness and peace and joy.” “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and *joy* in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Therefore, to pray for God’s rule in someone’s life (including your own) is to pray for joy.

3. The early Christians called on God for the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13; see also Eph. 3:19). The uniform experience of the early church was that the fullness of the Holy Spirit resulted in joyful boldness in witness (Acts 4:31) and joyful freedom in worship (Eph. 5:18-19). This is because “the fruit of the Holy Spirit is . . . *joy* . . .” (Gal. 5:22).

4. The early Christians called on God to save unbelievers.

“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Rom. 10:1). This was a prayer for joy in two senses. First, to be saved is to find the greatest treasure in the universe and joyfully count everything else as secondary. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Second, when a sinner repents, there is “*more joy* in heaven than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

Therefore, all who have the heart of heaven rejoice with those who rejoice—especially the angels and God himself.

5. The early Christians called on God for healing.

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas. 5:13-15). We see what happened in Samaria when Philip healed people there: “Many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much *joy* in that city” (Acts 8:7).

6. The early Christians called on God for strategic wisdom.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously without reproach, and it will be given him” (Jas. 1:5; see also Col. 1:9). In daily life, to live wisely is to achieve the God-centered goals for which we were created, including the glory of God in the gladness of our worship. Thus Paul describes the effect of being taught “in all wisdom”—namely, “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

7. The early Christians called on God for unity and harmony in the ranks.

Jesus modeled this prayer for them: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21). When Paul thought on this kind of unity, he said to the Philippians, “*Complete my joy* by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). The unity of God’s people is a great joy to those who desire “that the world may believe” God has sent Jesus Christ.

8. The early Christians called on God to help them know him better.

“[We have not ceased to pray for you to be] increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10; see also Eph. 1:17). Spiritually (not just intel-

lectually) knowing God is the foundation of all joy. That's why Jesus said the pure in heart are blessed (happy)—because they see God (Matt. 5:8).

9. The early Christians called on God to help them comprehend the love of Christ.

"I bow my knees before the Father . . . that you may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:14, 18). The difference between whether or not the love of Christ gives joy to the soul is whether we are able to comprehend some measure of the incomprehensible. As long as the love of Christ remains an idea, it does not move our hearts. But to pray for the power to comprehend is to pray for the awakening of joy.

10. The early Christians called on God for a deeper sense of assured hope.

"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers . . . that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you" (Eph. 1:16, 18). It is the universal experience of man and the explicit witness of the apostles that joy flows from hope: "May the God of *hope* fill you with all *joy* and peace in believing" (Rom. 15:13). "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). "Rejoice in hope" (Rom. 12:12).

11. The early Christians called on God for strength and endurance.

"[We have not ceased to pray for you to be] strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all *endurance* and patience *with joy*" (Col. 1:11; see also Eph. 3:16). It's not surprising that strength and endurance should be linked with joy because Nehemiah 8:10 already taught that "the joy of the LORD is your strength."

12. The early Christians called on God for their faith to be preserved.

First Jesus gave an example of this kind of prayer as he prayed for Peter just before his three denials: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). Jesus also instructs the disciples to pray for persevering faith: "Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have

strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). Then Paul makes plain that as he prays and works for the faith of the churches, he is explicitly working for their joy. “I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (Phil. 1:25). “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith” (2 Cor. 1:24).

13. The early Christians called on God that they might not fall into temptation.

“Lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:13). “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Matt. 26:41). What is temptation? It is always, in one way or another, the deception that something is more to be desired than God and his ways. Therefore, the prayer for deliverance is that we would not fall for that deception but always taste and know that God and his ways are to be desired above all others.

14. The early Christians called on God to complete their resolves and enable them to do good works.

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may . . . fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power” (2 Thess. 1:11). “[We have not ceased to pray for you that you will] walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work” (Col. 1:10). We know from experience and from the word of Jesus in Acts 20:35 that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” Therefore, when we pray for the enabling to give like this, we are praying for a great and joyful blessedness.

15. The early Christians called on God for forgiveness for their sins.

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). This is a plea for the ongoing application and enjoyment of the great verdict rendered over us in Jesus Christ: *Justified!* This standing in Christ that assures us of God’s favor is the foundation of all our joys.

16. The early Christians called on God for protection from the evil one.

“Deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13). The devil is the great deceiver, and the aim of all his deception, as with temptation, is that we desire

anything—even good, safe, wholesome things—above God. He offers a thousand substitutes and threatens us with a thousand miseries in this world. When we pray for deliverance from him, we mean: Never let us be attracted by the substitutes, and never let us infer from our miseries that God is not our all-satisfying Friend.

Everything the early church prayed for was part of their fight for joy in God. If this were not true, prayer would have been mercenary. They would have been making God into a genie and prayer into Aladdin's lamp. But when Jesus said, "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24), he meant, "In all your asking look for the fullness of joy in me. In this way all your asking will glorify me." So let us fight for joy by asking for it earnestly from God, and let us fight for joy by asking for everything else with this one great goal: in and through all his gifts to see more and taste more of Christ.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION ARE AS INSEPARABLE AS GOD'S WORD AND SPIRIT

It may seem strange, in this chapter and the next, to put so much emphasis on prayer after two chapters on the utterly indispensable role of *the Word of God*. The reason is that prayer and meditation are inseparable in the fight for joy. This inseparability is rooted in God's design to make the Spirit of God and the Word of God inseparable. His purpose for our lives is that the work of his Spirit happen through his Word, and that the work of his Word happen through his Spirit. The Spirit and the Word are inseparable in wakening and sustaining joy, from the first act of regeneration to the final act of glorification. God works by the Spirit through his Word to glorify his Son and satisfy his people.

Prayer and meditation correspond to God's Spirit and God's Word. *Prayer* is our response to God in reliance on his Spirit; and *meditation* is our response to God in reliance on his Word.

In *prayer* we praise the perfections of God through his Spirit, we thank God for what he has done by his Spirit, we confess our failures to trust the promise of his Spirit, and we ask for the help of his Spirit—all in Jesus' name. Prayer is the human expression of treasuring and trusting the Spirit of God.

In *meditation*, as the counterpart to prayer, we hear and ponder

and prize the Word of God. Meditation means reading the Bible and chewing on it to get the sweetness and the nourishment from it that God designs to give. It should involve memorizing the Word so that you can chew on it and be strengthened by it day and night. The essence of meditation is to think your way into the very mind of the inspired writers who were granted by inspiration to think the thoughts of God (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:21). Think and mull and ponder and chew until you see God the way they see God—namely, as precious and valuable and beautiful and desirable. This is how the Word serves joy.

Thus, even as the Spirit and the Word are inseparable in our lives, so prayer and meditation are inseparable. The fight for joy always involves both. Prayer without meditation on the Word of God will disintegrate into humanistic spirituality. It will simply reflect our own fallen ideas and feelings—not God’s. And meditation, without the humility of desperate prayer, will create proud legalism or hopeless despair.

Without prayer we will try to fulfill the Word in our own strength and think we are succeeding and so become proud Pharisees; or we will realize we are not succeeding and will give up in despair. Those are the only alternatives for those who try to live the Word of God without the Spirit of God—that is, those who try to separate the discipline of meditation from the dependence of prayer.

THE SPIRIT WAKENS JOY WHERE THE WORD EXALTS CHRIST

There is a crucial, Christ-exalting reason why the Spirit creates and sustains God-centered joy only through the Word of God. The reason is this: The Spirit binds his saving, joy-producing work to the Christ-centered Word of God so that Jesus Christ will be glorified through the joy that the Spirit inspires. The Spirit has been given, Jesus said, to glorify the Son of God (John 16:14). Therefore, he works through the Word that exalts the Son. And therefore prayer, which seeks for his work, is inseparable from meditation, which savors his Word.

Let me illustrate. In Luke 2:10-11 we hear a word from God to the shepherds: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city

of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Now what was the aim of this word? The aim was, at least, to produce joy. “We bring you good news of a *great joy*.” In other words, the truth about Jesus—that he is a Savior and Messiah and Lord, and that he was born in the prophesied city of David—all this truth was meant to inspire great joy. And when it did, who got the glory? Jesus did. Why? Because the Spirit used *news about him* to inspire the joy. He is Savior, Christ, Lord.

But suppose the shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, and suddenly the Holy Spirit came upon them, unidentified, and filled them with great joy but used no news at all to do it. No word. No revelation. Only the Spirit-created feeling of joy—like a euphoria that you might feel when you take a drug. Who, then, would be glorified for that? There is no word about Christ, and the Spirit remains incognito. The answer is, nobody would be glorified for this joy, except maybe the shepherds, for seeming so resilient against the cold winter’s night.

How would it glorify Christ if the Spirit created in us all kinds of good feelings with no reference to Jesus and his cross and resurrection? It wouldn’t. So the way the Spirit inspires and sustains joy in our lives is by humbly and quietly enabling us to see the beauty of Christ *in the Word*. Then our joy consciously arises from the truth about Christ, and he is glorified, but the Spirit remains the behind-the-scenes power that opened the eyes of our hearts. Thus we pray earnestly for the indispensable work of the Spirit, but we look earnestly to the indispensable Word of God.

HOW THIS WORKS IN MY EXPERIENCE

Very practically what this means for the fight for joy is that every day we must not just go to the Word, but pray over the Word—indeed before we even get to the Word, lest he fail to come. I close this chapter with the way this works in my own experience.

Almost every day I pray early in the morning that God would give me desires for him and his Word, because the desires I ought to have are absent or weak. In fact, I follow the acronym myself that I have given to many people to help them fight for joy. The acronym is I O U S. It is very limited and focused. It’s not all we should pray for. But this book (and

most of my life) is about the fight for joy. And that is what I O U S focuses on. Here's the way I pray over the Word in my fight for joy.

I—(*Incline!*) The first thing my soul needs is an *inclination toward God* and his Word. Without that, nothing else will happen of any value in my life. I must *want* to know God and read his Word and draw near to him. Where does that “want to” come from? It comes from God. So Psalm 119:36 teaches us to pray, “*Incline my heart* to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!” Very simply we ask God to take our hearts, which are more inclined to breakfast and the newspaper, and change that inclination. We are asking that God create desires that are not there.

O—(*Open!*) Next I need to have *the eyes of my heart opened* so that when my inclination leads me to the Word, I see what is really there, and not just my own ideas. Who opens the eyes of the heart? God does. So Psalm 119:18 teaches us to pray, “*Open my eyes*, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” So many times we read the Bible and see nothing wonderful. Its reading does not produce joy. So what can we do? We can cry to God: “Open the eyes of my heart, O Lord, to see what it says about you as *wonderful*.”

U—(*Unite!*) Then I am concerned that my heart is badly fragmented. Parts of it are inclined, and parts of it are not. Parts see wonder, and parts say, “That’s not so wonderful.” What I long for is a united heart where all the parts say a joyful *Yes!* to what God reveals in his Word. Where does that wholeness and unity come from? It comes from God. So Psalm 86:11 teaches us to pray, “Unite my heart to fear your name.” Don’t stumble over the word *fear* when you thought we were seeking *joy*. The fear of the Lord is a joyful experience when you renounce all sin. A thunderstorm can be a trembling joy when you know you can’t be destroyed by lightning. “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to . . . the prayer of your servants who *delight to fear your name*” (Neh. 1:11). “His *delight* shall be in the *fear of the LORD*” (Isa. 11:3). Therefore pray that God would *unite* your heart to joyfully fear the Lord.

S—(*Satisfy!*) What I really want from all this engagement with the Word of God and the work of his Spirit in answer to my prayers is *for my heart to be satisfied with God* and not with the world. Where does that satisfaction come from? It comes from God. So

Psalm 90:14 teaches us to pray, “*Satisfy us* in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”

I O U S ADMITS GOD IS OUR ONLY HOPE
FOR JOY

This acronym has served me well for years. This is frontline warfare for me. I know the agonizing experience of Robert Robinson’s hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” What makes this hymn so relevant for me is that it acknowledges God’s absolute right to bind my heart to himself, and then it turns that right into a prayer.

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.⁸*

“Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.” A “fetter” is a chain. I pray this—oh, how I pray this with all my wandering heart—“Grant me, O God, to see the surpassing value of your goodness so that it binds me, as with a chain, to you.” It’s the same prayer that George Croly (1780-1860) prayed in his well-known hymn, “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart.”

*Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.⁹*

I have heard people object to that last line. They say love should be free, not forced. True. But there are two kinds of forcing. One is against our will. The other is by changing our will. The first results in coerced action. The second results in free action. My own suspicion is that those who object to this prayer have never seriously confronted their own hardness of heart. They have not taken seriously enough the biblical diagnosis of

our condition found in the word *cannot* in Romans 8:7-8: “The mind that is set on the flesh . . . does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it *cannot*. Those who are in the flesh *cannot* please God.” And I wonder, have those who object to this hymn ever come to terms with why the psalmist prays so urgently and repeatedly, “Incline my heart” (Ps. 119: 36, 112; 141:4)? For my part, the only hope I have to love God as I ought is that he would overcome all my disinclination and bind my heart to himself in love. That is the grace I must have to be a Christian and to live in joy.

Hence I pray to God repeatedly: Incline my heart! Open the eyes of my heart! Unite my heart! Satisfy my heart! Prayer is, therefore, not only the measure of our hearts, revealing what we really desire; it is also the indispensable remedy for our hearts when we do not desire God the way we ought.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-17

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

DANIEL 6:10

My practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed myself in the morning. Now . . . the first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious word, was, to begin to meditate on the word of God, searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it. . . . The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that, though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer, but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it.

GEORGE MUELLER

*A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Mueller*¹

The Practice of Prayer in the Fight for Joy

*Morning, Noon, and Evening
Without Ceasing*



To be as practically helpful as possible, I would like to look at the question, how then do we pray for joy? By “how” I mean the nitty-gritty questions of when, and where, and what wording? I hope that these thoughts will feel like empowering encouragements rather than confining prescriptions.

THE SOURCE OF THE FRUIT-BEARING LIFE OF LOVE

Let’s begin by considering the simple words of 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” The words might seem to dangle in a string of commands. But there is a flow of thought here that makes this admonition relevant to the fight for joy—and the love that flows from it. It is a flow of thought much like the flow we saw in the previous chapter from 2 Corinthians 8:1-3, and like the flow of thought in Psalm 1, where delighting in the law of the Lord day and night makes you like a tree that bears nourishing fruit even in drought. Here is the relevant context:

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one

repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
(1 Thess. 5:14-18)

Admonishing, encouraging, helping, being patient, not repaying evil for evil, seeking to do good to all—this is a fruit-bearing life. He is telling us to be like trees planted by streams of water that bring forth fruit. This is the effect of delighting in the Word of God in Psalm 1:3. Look at all these needy people draining you. The “idle” are provoking you; the “fainthearted” are leaning on you; the “weak” are depleting you. But you are called to encourage and help and be patient and not return evil for evil. In other words, you are called to have spiritual resources that can be durable and fruitful and nourishing when others are idle and fainthearted and weak and mean-spirited.

How? Where do we get the resources to love like that? Verse 16 answers, “Rejoice always.” That corresponds to “delight” in Psalm 1. Presumably, this rejoicing is not primarily based on circumstances, but on God and his promises, because the people around us are idle and fainthearted and weak and antagonistic. This would make an ordinary person angry, sullen, and discouraged. But we are supposed to have our roots planted somewhere other than circumstance. The roots of our lives are supposed to be drawing up the nutriments of joy from a source that cannot be depleted—the river of God and his Word. The one who delights in the Lord is “like a tree planted by streams of water.”

What then is the key to this rejoicing, or this delight, which sustains the life of fruit-bearing love? Verse 17 says, “Pray without ceasing.” And verse 18 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” So the answer seems to be that continual prayer and thanksgiving is a key to joy in God that makes a person durable and fruitful in relation to all kinds of people.² Therefore one biblical key to maintaining joy in God and his Word is to pray without ceasing.

WHAT DOES “PRAY WITHOUT CEASING” MEAN?

If we are going to be fruit-bearing people, and not wither under the pressures of idle, fainthearted, weak, and hurtful people, then we must fight, as 1 Thessalonians 5:16 says, to “rejoice always” or to “delight . . . in

the word of the LORD . . . day and night” (Ps. 1:2). And to do that, as verse 17 says, we need to “pray without ceasing.” Which leads to the question of what that means.

Praying without ceasing means at least three things. First, it means that there is a spirit of dependence that should permeate all we do. This is the very spirit and essence of prayer. So, even when we are not speaking consciously to God, there is a deep, abiding dependence on him that is woven into the heart of faith. In that sense, we “pray” or have the spirit of prayer continuously.

Second—and I think this is what Paul has in mind most immediately—praying without ceasing means praying repeatedly and often. I base this on the use of the word “without ceasing” (*adialeiptōs*) in Romans 1:9, where Paul says, “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that *without ceasing* [*adialeiptos*] I mention you.” Now we can be sure that Paul did not mention the Romans every minute of his waking life, or even every minute of his prayers. He prayed about many other things. But he mentioned them over and over, and often. So “without ceasing” doesn’t mean that, verbally or mentally, we have to be speaking prayers every minute of the day in the fight for joy. It means we should pray over and over, and often. Our default mental state should be: “O God, help . . .”

Third, praying without ceasing means not giving up on prayer. Don’t ever come to a point in your life where you cease to pray at all. Don’t abandon the God of hope and say, “There’s no use praying.” Jesus is very jealous for us to learn this lesson. One of his parables is introduced by the words, “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray *and not lose heart*” (Luke 18:1). He knew our experience in prayer would tempt us to quit altogether. So he, along with the apostle Paul, says, Never lose heart. Go on praying. Don’t cease.

So from the context of 1 Thessalonians 5 I say that the key to “rejoice always” is to “pray without ceasing.” Lean on God all the time for the miracle of joy in your life. Never give up looking to him for help. Come to him repeatedly during the day and often. Make your default mental state a Godward longing for all that you need, especially for spiritual desires.

CEASELESS PRAYER AND PERSISTENT DISCIPLINE

In Chapter Eight we made the case that continual communion with God in his Word is important. The upright man of Psalm 1 meditates on the law of the Lord “day and night.” We might have said “meditates without ceasing.” But then we made the case that this continual, spontaneous communion with God by his Word depends in part on plan and discipline. In other words, if there are no set and disciplined times of Bible reading and meditation and memorization, the spontaneity and continual communion will dry up. The plants of spontaneous communion grow in the well-tended garden of disciplined Bible-reading and memorization.

So it is with prayer. We are told to pray “without ceasing.” We may do it anywhere, anytime. It is the air we breathe. But that will cease to be the case if there are no disciplined times set aside for prayer and a plan to keep them. If you want to have a vital hour-by-hour, spontaneous walk with God, you must also have disciplined regular meetings with God for prayer. A husband who says he never has special times alone with his wife because the daily air is charged with intimacy will not long breathe that air. The plants of ceaseless prayer grow in the garden of persistent discipline.

DANIEL'S DEFIANT DISCIPLINE IN PRAYER

The prophet Daniel is a good example. He had a remarkable relationship with God, especially when it was critically needed. But what did that continual relationship grow out of? It was the disciplined regularity of his prayer life. Darius, the king, issued a decree that no one should pray to any god but only to the king himself (Dan. 6:7-9). The penalty for disobedience would be death.

What did Daniel do? He reveals to us the discipline from which his spiritual power flowed. According to Daniel 6:10, “When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, *as he had done previously*.” Daniel's daily custom was to pray in the same place three times a day.

The point is not that three times a day is the ideal number. Others have prayed more often: “Seven times a day I praise you for your righ-

teous rules” (Ps. 119:164). The point is this: If we hope to fight for joy day and night by praying without ceasing, we will need to develop disciplined times of prayer.³

HOW IMPORTANT IS EARLY-MORNING PRAYER?

The example of Jesus and the testimony of lovers of Christ throughout the centuries points us to early-morning prayer as decisively important. “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). I commend the early morning as one crucial time for a disciplined, regular meeting with God over the Word and prayer.

First, it signals to our conscience that this is of first importance in the day. That witness from our action to our conscience has a joyful effect on the Christian mind. Second, early-morning prayer strikes the first blow in the battle of the day, instead of waiting till we are besieged from all sides. Third, what we do daily and do early shapes the spirit of our minds and brings us into a disposition of humility and trust that will bear better fruit than anxiety or self-reliance. Fourth, since beginning the day with the Word of God is crucial (as we saw in Chapter Eight), therefore prayer is equally crucial since the Word will not open its best wonders to us without prayer: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). Fifth, it is uncanny how Satan can use even good things to squeeze prayer out of our schedule if we miss the early-morning hour. I have seen it again and again. If I say to myself, “I will give some time to prayer later,” it generally does not happen.

William Law (1686-1761), who is famous mainly for his classic *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, argues vigorously for “daily early prayer in the morning.” “His own day, which began at 5 a.m., was carefully planned to allow time for reading, writing, and works of charity, as well as prayer.”⁴ His main argument is that the discipline of early rising for prayer and the Word cultivated and demonstrated a spiritual condition that glorified Christ and gratified the soul.

If our blessed Lord used to pray early before day; if He spent whole nights in prayer; if the devout Anna was day and night in the temple; if St. Paul and Silas at midnight sang praises unto God; if the primitive Christians, for several hundred years, besides their hours of

prayers in the daytime, met publicly in the churches at midnight, to join in psalms and prayers; is it not certain that these practices showed the state of their heart? Are they not so many plain proofs of the whole turn of their minds?⁵

Law was persuaded that “sleep is . . . a dull, stupid state of existence” and that “prayer is the nearest approach to God, and the highest enjoyment of Him that we are capable of in this life.”⁶ Therefore, his book overflows with the benefits of early-morning prayer.

If you were to rise early every morning as an instance of self-denial, as a method of renouncing indulgence, as a means of redeeming your time and fitting your spirit for prayer, you would find mighty advantages from it. This method, though it seems such a small circumstance of life, would in all probability be a means of great piety. It would keep it constantly in your head that softness and idleness were to be avoided, that self-denial was a part of Christianity. It would teach you to exercise power over yourself, and make you able by degrees to renounce other pleasures and tempers that war against the soul. . . .

But, above all, one certain benefit from this method you will be sure of having; it will best fit and prepare you for the reception of the Holy Spirit. When you thus begin the day in the spirit of religion, renouncing sleep, because you are to renounce softness and redeem your time; this disposition, as it puts your heart into a good state so it will procure the assistance of the Holy Spirit; what is so planted and watered will certainly have an increase from God. You will then speak from your heart, your soul will be awake, your prayers will refresh you like meat and drink, you will feel what you say, and begin to know what saints and holy men have meant by fervors of devotion.⁷

PLANNED MEETINGS WITH GOD LATER IN THE DAY

I do not want to give the impression that the early-morning hour is the only time for regular, planned meetings with God in prayer. The fight for joy is too relentless for that. Daniel kept his appointments with God three times a day. I would commend a longer time in focused prayer and meditation early in the morning, perhaps an hour (the length will vary

with your situation in life), and then two or three other short times later in the day, roughly corresponding to lunch, dinner, and bedtime. These may be no more than a few minutes. What matters more than the length is the intensity of the focus.

In these later times of prayer, I am not referring to the thoughts directed Godward as you walk back to work from the cafeteria or as you run to the car. These are good. They are part of praying without ceasing. Rather I am referring to a few minutes of very focused stillness and solitude, with the Bible open in front of you—or the memory serving up some nourishing text on the tongue of your soul. The aim is to call to mind a few verses and to pray that God would now satisfy your heart in him for the next part of the day and free you from sinful desires, so that you exalt Christ and love people. In this way each segment of the day (and then the night before you go to bed) is consciously dedicated to God by an act of consecration in focused prayer. It is amazing how just a few minutes over the Word at midday and mid-evening can bring spiritual clarity and power and peaceful joy to the next few hours, even in the midst of much pressure.

PLAN THE TIME BEFORE IT COMES

I have assumed that these times of prayer, especially the early-morning time, have their own special place and time. I urge you to plan for this. Think ahead what the time will be. Win that victory the night before, not in the morning. Decide the evening before when the alarm will call you from sleep to prayer.

The discipline to rise early is not as difficult as the discipline of going to bed. This did not used to be so. Before electricity and radio and television and the Internet, going to bed soon after dark was not so difficult. There wasn't much to do. Today the strongest allurements to stay up and be entertained are against us. Therefore, the battle against weariness, which makes us drowsy as soon as we open our Bible in the morning, has to be fought in the evening, not just in the morning. When you have decided when the alarm will call you to prayer, then decide when you must go to bed so that you are not exhausted when the alarm goes off. If you need caffeine to keep you awake in the morning, I will leave that with your conscience. Maybe that's why God created it.

Staying awake to pray is certainly a better use of caffeine than staying awake for almost anything else.

THINK CREATIVELY ABOUT THE PLACE YOU PRAY

In the evening decide beforehand not only when but *where* you will pray and read when you get up in the morning. There needs to be a measure of privacy so that you are not distracted and are able to read and sing and cry. If complete seclusion is not possible, create the best situation you can, explaining to spouse or children or roommates that when you are in that chair at that hour you would like to be undisturbed.

I would suggest that you think creatively about the place of prayer. I have often wondered why Christians build houses with a room designated for play (called a den) and for food (called a kitchen) and for sleep (called a bedroom) and for cleaning (called a bathroom) and for clothes (called a closet), but do not build a room for the solitude of prayer and meditation. But if we gave thought to this, could we not find or create such a space? The reason we don't do it is mainly that nobody thinks of it. But now I have caused you to think of it. Where could you create such a space? Is there a space under the stairs that could have a kneeling mat and a prayer bench and a light?

In 1975, when we bought our first home, I built a prayer bench with a place for my elbows in a kneeling posture, and a place for my Bible to lie, and a shelf underneath for the Bible or other books and a notepad. It has been with me ever since in three different houses. For the last twenty-one years we have lived in the same house, and there has been a nook in my study, created by positioning filing cabinets to block it off from the rest of the space. There the prayer bench welcomes me every morning and several times during the day. God alone knows the tears and songs that have mingled there. I urge you to think creatively. Seriously consider building a place of prayer, even if it is just the rearrangement of furniture or the cleaning out of an unused storage space.

GOING OUTSIDE MAY BE BEST OF ALL

Of course, living in a cold climate, as I do, I don't naturally think of praying and meditating out of doors. But surely that is a good idea for some. George Mueller, the nineteenth-century pastor and lover of orphans in

Bristol, England, has been a great help to me in the counsel he has given about the fight for joy through prayer and meditation. He is unabashed in saying that the fight for joy is paramount:

According to my judgement the most important point to be attended to is this: above all things see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord. Other things may press upon you, the Lord's work may even have urgent claims upon your attention, but I deliberately repeat, it is of supreme and paramount importance that you should seek above all things to have your souls truly happy in God Himself! Day by day seek to make this the most important business of your life.⁸

Mueller discovered that walking early in the morning with a New Testament in hand was an excellent way of fighting for joy.

I find it very beneficial to my health to walk thus for meditation before breakfast, and am now so in the habit of using the time for that purpose, that when I get into the open air, I generally take out a New Testament of good sized type which I carry with me for that purpose. . . . I find it very profitable, not only to my body, but also to my soul.⁹

Whether outdoors or indoors, places are not sacred intrinsically. But we make them sacred by what we do there. In the battle for joy, small places indoors or open spaces outdoors can become powerfully strategic.

PLAN YOUR METHOD OF PRAYER

When a place and time are settled, move toward settling a method of prayer that will intensify your fight for joy. I don't mean anything like a straitjacket that hinders spontaneity. I mean simple, planned structures that keep us from mental wandering and rambling and empty phrases and worldly desires.

THE GREAT BENEFITS OF PRAYING THE WORD OF GOD

The main method of prayer in the fight for joy is to pray the Word of God. That is, to read or recite the Word and turn it into prayer as you go. Most people (certainly including me) do not have the power of mind

to look at nothing and yet offer up to God significant spiritual desires for any length of time. I suspect this has always been the case. To pray for longer than a few minutes in a God-centered, Christ-exalting way requires the help of God's Spirit, and the Spirit loves to help by the Word he inspired.

This difficulty of focusing the mind and staying on track accounts, in part, for the fact that so many of the Psalms, even though they are prayers, are permeated with the history of redemption that had been recorded in Scripture (e.g., Ps. 77; 99; 103:6-8; 104; 105; 106). It also accounts for why the glimpse we get into the prayers of the early church reveals that they were, at least sometimes, built out of Scripture.

They lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.' . . . Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness." (Acts 4:24-26, 29)

GEORGE MUELLER'S DISCOVERY ABOUT THE WORD AND PRAYER

It was a great encouragement to me over twenty years ago to read the testimony of George Mueller, that he leaned heavily on the Word in order to keep his focus while praying. It took him ten years of faltering prayer before he learned this lesson. Perhaps his story can spare you such a struggle. Mueller wrote this in May 1841 when he was thirty-five years old. He had been converted when he was twenty.

The difference then between my former practice and my present one is this. Formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible. . . . But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees, before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, &c.; and often, after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, or even half an

hour, I only then began *really to pray*. I scarcely ever suffer now in this way.

My practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed myself in the morning. *Now . . .* the first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious word, was, to begin to meditate on the word of God, searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it. . . . The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that, though I did not, as it were, give myself to *prayer*, but to *meditation*, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it.¹⁰

This is the central method of prayer that I believe most earnest Christians have discovered: "to meditate on the word of God . . . turning all, as I go, into prayer." Someone may ask, "How can I spend an hour in prayer? I'm done asking for what I need in five or ten minutes." I answer: Take a passage of Scripture, and start reading it slowly. After each sentence, pause and go back and turn what you read into prayer. In this way you can pray as long as you can read. You may pray all day.

DO YOU PRAY THE WAY AN UNBELIEVER WOULD?

There are more benefits to praying over the Word in this way than the fact that it helps us stay focused. It also has the effect of shaping our minds and hearts, so that we desire what the Word encourages us to desire, and not just what we desire by nature. That is why the prayers of Bible-saturated people sound so different. Most people, before their prayers are soaked in Scripture, simply bring their natural desires to God. In other words, they pray the way an unbeliever would pray who is convinced that God might give him what he wants: health, a better job, safe journeys, a prosperous portfolio, successful children, plenty of food, a happy marriage, a car that works, a comfortable retirement, etc. None of these is evil. They're just natural. You don't have to be born again to want any of these. Desiring them—even from God—is no evi-

dence of saving faith. So if these are all you pray for, there is a deep problem. Your desires have not yet been changed to put the glory of Christ at the center.

But when you saturate your mind with the Christ-exalting Word of God and turn it into prayer, your desires and your prayers become spiritual. That is, they are shaped by the Holy Spirit into God-centered, Christ-exalting prayers. The glory of Christ, and the name of God, and the spiritual well-being of people, and the delight you have in knowing Jesus—these become your dominant concerns and your constant requests. You still pray for health and marriage and job and journeys, but now what you want to happen is that, in all these, Christ will be exalted. This changes the pattern and passion of your prayers. Your prayer for a journey is not merely that it be safe, but that all along the way your joy would be in God and that he would shine through you. Your prayer for your job is not merely that it be stable and peaceful and prosperous, but that it truly serves the needs of society and that in all your labor and all your relationships your joy in Christ and your love for people would make a name for Jesus.¹¹

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Another advantage of praying the Word of God is that this is part of what it means to “pray in the Holy Spirit,” and praying in the Spirit is how we “keep ourselves in the love of God.” I get these two phrases from the book of Jude. There the brother of the Lord Jesus commands us, “Beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; *pray in the Holy Spirit*; keep yourselves in the love of God” (vv. 20-21). Literally, the first two commands are participles and tell us *how* to keep ourselves in the love of God: “Beloved, [by] building yourselves up in your most holy faith, [and by] praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God.”

Don't think that keeping yourself in the love of God hangs decisively on us. The book of Jude begins and ends with the opposite truth. It begins with the words, “To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and *kept for* Jesus Christ” (v. 1). Here Christians are identified with three words: called, loved, and *kept*. And the keeping is done by God, not us.

Then the book of Jude ends with the words, “Now to him who is able to *keep* you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (v. 24). Again it is God who is keeping. Therefore when Jude says that by “praying in the Holy Spirit” we are to keep ourselves in the love of God, we know he means that prayer is one of God’s instruments for keeping us in his love. Beware of the cynical mind-set that says, “If God is the decisive keeper of my soul (vv. 1, 24), then I don’t need to ‘keep myself in the love of God’” (v. 20). That would be like saying, since God is the decisive giver of life, then I don’t need to breathe.¹²

PRAYING THE WORD AND PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT

Now how does praying the Word of God the way Mueller suggests relate to praying in the Holy Spirit? The best brief statement I have found of what it means to pray in the Holy Spirit goes like this: It means “so to pray that the Holy Spirit is the *moving* and *guiding* power.”¹³ In other words, when you pray in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is “moving” you to pray. That is, his power motivates, enables, and energizes your prayer. And when you pray in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is “guiding” how you pray and what you pray for. So to pray in the Holy Spirit is to be moved and guided by the Holy Spirit. We pray by his *power* and according to his *direction*.

These two—the Spirit’s power and direction—correspond to two ways that the Word of God functions in our prayer. The *power* of the Spirit is offered in the promises of God’s Word, and we experience it by *faith* in the promise. The *direction* of the Spirit is embodied in the wisdom of God’s Word, and we experience it by *being saturated* with that wisdom. So if we would “pray in the Holy Spirit” we should, like Mueller, pray the Word of God, trusting the promises and absorbing the wisdom.

STAYING IN THE LOVE OF GOD IS JOY UNSPEAKABLE

So when we follow Mueller’s advice and turn the Scriptures into prayer as we read, we will be helped to “pray in the Holy Spirit.” The Scriptures will awaken faith in the Spirit’s power to help us pray (Rom. 8:26), and the Scriptures will shape our minds to pray in the direction of the Spirit’s

will. When Christ's words dwell in us richly, he abides in us powerfully (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18). And when we thus "pray in the Holy Spirit," we will, as Jude says, "keep yourselves in the love of God" (v. 21). And as our precious position in the love of God becomes more and more real to us,¹⁴ we will rejoice with joy unspeakable. Therefore, praying the Word of God is a crucial strategy in the fight for joy.

SOMETHING FIXED AND SOMETHING FREE

William Law adds this counsel to increase the benefit of our regular times of prayer: "At all stated hours of prayer it will be a great benefit to you to have something fixed and something at liberty in your devotions."¹⁵ He means more than having the fixed Word of God as your guide in meditation and prayer. He means that in the fight for joy, it helps to have a focused center to your praying, and it helps to have some written, Bible-saturated prayers to keep you from sinking to a low level of man-centered craving.

CENTERING ON GOD WITH THE LORD'S PRAYER

I have found over several decades that the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer help me keep God at the center of my desires in prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10). According to Jesus' instruction the first burden we should bring to God in prayer is that the name of God be "hallowed." In the Lord's prayer we are asking that God would do whatever he must do so that his name is revered and esteemed and cherished in the world.¹⁶ We are asking that his spiritual kingdom come in the hearts of people, and that the in-breaking of his final, glorious kingdom move toward consummation. We are asking that world events, and the progress of missions, would move quickly toward the time when all those who are left on earth would do the will of God the way the angels do it in heaven.

If these three petitions become the lodestar in the constellation of our prayers, all other requests will have their proper place. These three will shine in and through them all, so that every request, even for daily bread, is really a concrete way of asking that God's name and will and kingdom take the supreme place in our hearts and in history.

HELPING US BE SOBER AND SERIOUS BEFORE GOD
IN PRAYER

In the modern, developed world, our minds are permeated with superficial entertainment. Coming to God in prayer with reverence and awe is not natural. Feeling the utter seriousness of the fight for joy in God is foreign to us. We need help. William Law suggests that we regularly use some fixed form such as the following when we come to God with requests.

O Savior of the world, God of God, Light of Light, Thou that art The Brightness of Thy Father's glory, and the express Image of his person; Thou that art the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End of all things; Thou that hast destroyed the power of the devil, that hast overcome death; Thou that art entered into the Holy of Holies, that sittest at the right hand of the Father, that art high above all thrones and principalities, that makest intercession for all the world; Thou that art the judge of the quick and the dead; Thou that wilt speedily come down in Thy Father's glory to reward all men according to their works, be Thou my light and my peace, etc.¹⁷

The point of such a formal beginning to prayer—which is full of descriptions of Jesus—Law says, is that these descriptions “are not only proper acts of adoration, but will, if they are repeated with attention, fill our hearts with the highest fervors of true devotion.”¹⁸

It may be that some of you are naturally inclined and able to tell the Lord Jesus how great and wonderful he is as you begin your prayers. But most of us are prone to bluster into the throne room of heaven—as into a hardware store with a broken piece of plumbing—rather than with joyful wonder that we are admitted here only by the blood of Christ and that we come to the greatest Being in the universe. Therefore, it is helpful that some “fixed form”—at least from time to time—remind us that adoration is a fitting approach.

The other form that William Law suggests as a beginning to our plea for help is the following—as a way of wakening our hope of being heard with mercy.

O Holy Jesus, Son of the most high God, Thou that wert scourged at a pillar, stretched and nailed upon a cross for the sins of the world, unite me to Thy cross, and fill my soul with Thy holy, humble, and

suffering spirit. O Fountain of Mercy, Thou that didst save the thief upon the cross, save me from the guilt of a sinful life; Thou that didst cast seven devils out of Mary Magdalene, cast out of my heart all evil thoughts and wicked tempers. O Giver of Life, Thou that didst raise Lazarus from the dead, raise up my soul from the death and darkness of sin. Thou that didst give to Thy Apostles power over unclean spirits, give me power over mine own heart. Thou that didst appear unto Thy disciples when the doors were shut, do Thou appear to me in the secret apartment of my heart. Thou that didst cleanse the lepers, heal the sick, and give sight to the blind, cleanse my heart, heal the disorders of my soul, and fill me with heavenly light.¹⁹

The point here is that often when we come to pray, our minds are filled with ordinary earthly things and the potential and power of what the world can do for us, if we try harder. The poet William Wordsworth describes our unfitness for Nature's gifts the way I would describe our unfitness for God's gifts as we come to pray.

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*²⁰

We do not naturally or easily shift from the mind-set of “getting and spending” into a mind-set that sees Jesus as more desirable than the “sordid boon” of this world. We need—at least sometimes—“something fixed” to remind us, from Christ's own life and death, that surely he will hear our cries for help and become our all-satisfying treasure.²¹

When we look at the “sordid boon” that the world offers, the fight for joy is to see that it will not satisfy. Prayer is an essential strategy in seeing the world this way. We must ask God “without ceasing” that our eyes be open to the insufficiency of worldly pleasures, even the innocent ones. And we must plead that the taste buds of our souls be ever alive to the beauty of Christ.

FASTING, THE HUMBLE HANDMAIDEN OF PRAYER

Two additional strategies in the fight for faith can intensify the earnestness of this kind of praying. The first is fasting. I won't say much here,

because I have written an entire book on fasting called *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer*.²² But the essence of fasting is so relevant in the fight for joy, I should at least mention it. Jesus said, “When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:17-18). The reward is ultimately God himself. Therefore fasting is an expression of hunger for God.

In another place Jesus referred to himself as a bridegroom and his disciples as the wedding guests and said, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15). We live in the days when the Bridegroom has been taken away (between the first and second coming of Christ). The meaning of fasting in these days is that we long to have the Bridegroom back.

So in both these texts the point of fasting is to express longing for Christ and all that God is for us in him. Fasting is the hungry handmaid of prayer. Like prayer she both reveals and remedies. She reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us—or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God. And she remedies by intensifying the earnestness of our prayer and saying with our whole body what prayer says with the heart: I long to be satisfied in God alone!

Is eating then evil? No. Paul said that false teachers will arise who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). How then do the goodness of eating and the goodness of fasting fit together? I will try to answer with some brief excerpts from *A Hunger for God*.

Bread magnifies Christ in two ways: by being eaten with gratitude for his goodness, and by being forfeited out of hunger for God himself. When we eat, we taste the emblem of our heavenly food—the Bread of Life. And when we fast we say, “I love the Reality above the emblem.” In the heart of the saint both eating and fasting are worship. Both magnify Christ. Both send the heart—grateful and yearning—to the Giver. Each has its appointed place and each has its

danger. The danger of eating is that we fall in love with the gift; the danger of fasting is that we belittle the gift and glory in our willpower. . . .

My aim and my prayer in writing this book is that it might awaken a hunger for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples. Fasting proves the presence, and fans the flame, of that hunger. It is an intensifier of spiritual desire. It is a faithful enemy of fatal bondage to innocent things. It is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence: "This much, O God, I long for you and for the manifestation of your glory in the world!" . . .

If you don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because you have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because you have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Your soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great.²³ God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. I invite you to turn from the dulling effects of food and the dangers of idolatry, and to say with some simple fast: "This much, O God, I want you."²⁴

As with many difficult things in life, fasting is meant to help us in the fight for joy. William Law put it like this:

Although these abstinences give some pain to the body, yet they so lessen the power of bodily appetites and passions, and so increase our taste of spiritual joys, that even these severities of religion, when practiced with discretion, add much to the comfortable enjoyment of our lives.²⁵

WHEN MY PRAYERS ARE ANSWERED BY THE PRAYERS OF OTHERS

I will mention one more strategy for intensifying the power of prayer in the fight for joy—namely, the importance of having other people pray with you and for you. After telling us to call for the elders to pray for us when we are sick, James says, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (Jas. 5:16). The implication here for the fight for joy is that we should involve other Christians in our fight. We should confess to them our struggles, and we

should ask them to pray that we would be “healed” from our half-hearted love for Jesus.

God has his reasons why the prayers of others might lift my darkness when my own prayers didn’t. But be careful here. Don’t assume that all your praying was in vain. It may be that your own praying was used by God to make you willing to seek the prayers of others. It may be that your prayers were answered in the blessing that came in answer to their prayers. One of God’s reasons for calling us to corporate prayer is given in 2 Corinthians 1:11. Paul asks for prayer for himself and gives his reason: “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” When people are involved in each other’s lives, more thanksgiving rises to God when any of them is blessed.

In other words, everything I have written in these chapters about praying for joy will be multiplied in its effectiveness when we think of it corporately. The fight for joy is a battle to be fought alongside comrades. We do not fight alone. To be a Christian is to be a part of the Body of Christ. We are meant to help each other fight for joy. This was the apostle’s life: “We work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). And prayer for each other²⁶ is at the heart of this camaraderie.