

## Chapter 1



# TREATING DELIGHT AS DUTY IS CONTROVERSIAL

“Christian Hedonism” is a controversial name for an old-fashioned way of life.

It goes back to *Moses*, who wrote the first books of the Bible and threatened terrible things if we would not be happy: “Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart...therefore you shall serve your enemies” (Deuteronomy 28:47–48).

...and to the Israelite king *David*, who called God his “exceeding joy” (Psalm 43:4); and said, “Serve the LORD with gladness” (Psalm 100:2); and “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Psalm 37:4); and who prayed, “Satisfy us in the

morning with Your lovingkindness, that we may...be glad all our days” (Psalm 90:14); and who promised that complete and lasting pleasure is found in God alone: “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Psalm 16:11).

...and to *Jesus*, who said, “Blessed are you when people insult you.... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great” (Matthew 5:11–12); and who said, “I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11); and who endured the Cross “for the joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2); and who promised that, in the end, faithful servants would hear the words, “Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

...and to *James* the brother of Jesus, who said, “Consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2).

...and to the apostle *Paul*, who was “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10); and who described the ministry of his team as being “workers with you for your joy” (2 Corinthians 1:24); and who commanded Christians to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4);

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and even to “exult in...tribulations” (Romans 5:3).

...and to the apostle *Peter*, who said, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Peter 4:13).

...and to *Saint Augustine*, who, in the year 386, found his freedom from lust and lechery in the superior pleasures of God. “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose!... You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

...and to *Blaise Pascal*, who saw that “all men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

...and to the *Puritans* whose aim was to know God so well that “delighting in him, may be the work of our lives,”<sup>6</sup> because they knew that this joy would “arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.”<sup>7</sup>

...and to *Jonathan Edwards*, who discovered and

taught as powerfully as anyone that “the happiness of the creature consists in rejoicing in God, by which also God is magnified and exalted.”<sup>8</sup> “The end of the creation is that the creation might glorify [God]. Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed?”<sup>9</sup>

...and to *C. S. Lewis*, who discovered “We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>10</sup>

...and to a thousand *missionaries*, who have left everything for Christ and in the end have said, with David Livingstone, “I never made a sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup>

Christian Hedonism is not new.

So if Christian Hedonism is old-fashioned, why is it so controversial? One reason is that it insists that joy is not just the spin-off of obedience to God, but *part of* obedience. It seems as though people are willing to let joy be a by-product of our relationship to God, but not an essential part of it. People are uncomfortable saying that we are duty-bound to pursue joy.

They say things like, “Don’t pursue joy; pursue obedience.” But Christian Hedonism responds, “That’s like saying, ‘Don’t eat apples; eat fruit.’” Because joy *is* an act of obedience. We are *commanded* to rejoice in God. If obedience is doing what God commands, then joy is not merely the spin-off of obedience, it *is* obedience. The Bible tells us

over and over to pursue joy: “Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; and shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart” (Psalm 32:11). “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy” (Psalm 67:4). “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Psalm 37:4). “Rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Luke 10:20). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

The Bible does not teach that we should treat delight as a mere by-product of duty. C. S. Lewis got it right when he wrote to a friend, “It is a Christian duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can.”<sup>12</sup> Yes, that is risky and controversial. But it is strictly true. Maximum happiness, both qualitatively and quantitatively, is precisely what we are duty-bound to pursue.

One wise Christian described the relationship between duty and delight this way:

Suppose a husband asks his wife if he must kiss her good night. Her answer is, “You must, but not that kind of a must.” What she means is this: “Unless a spontaneous affection for my person motivates you, your overtures are stripped of all moral value.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, if there is no pleasure in the kiss, the duty of kissing has not been done. Delight in her person, expressed in the kiss, is part of the duty, not a by-product of it.

But if that is true—if delight in doing good is part of what doing good *is*—then the pursuit of pleasure is part of the pursuit of virtue. You can see why this starts to get controversial. It’s the seriousness of it all. “You really mean this?” someone says. “You really mean that *hedonism* is not just a trick word to get our attention. It actually says something utterly, devastatingly true about the way we should live. The pursuit of pleasure really is a necessary part of being a good person.” That’s right. I mean it. The Bible means it. God means it. It is very serious. We are not playing word games.

Let it be crystal clear: We are always talking about joy *in God*. Even joy in doing good is finally joy in God, because the ultimate good that we always aim at is displaying the glory of God and expanding our own joy in God to others. Any other joy would be qualitatively insufficient for the longing of our souls and quantitatively too short for our eternal need. In God alone is *fullness* of joy and joy *forever*.

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## Chapter 2



# GLORIFY GOD BY ENJOYING HIM FOREVER

Maximizing our joy in God is what we were created for. “But wait a minute,” someone says, “what about the glory of God? Didn’t God create us for *His* glory? But here you are saying that He created us to pursue *our* joy!” Which is it? Are we created for His glory or our joy?

Oh how passionately I agree that God created us for His glory! Yes! Yes! God is the most God-centered person in the universe. This is the heartbeat of everything I preach and write. This is what Christian Hedonism is designed to preserve and pursue! God’s chief end is to glorify God. This is written all over the Bible. It is the aim of all God does.

God's goal at every stage of creation and salvation is to magnify His glory. You can magnify with a microscope or with a telescope. A microscope magnifies by making tiny things look bigger than they are. A telescope magnifies by making gigantic things (like stars), which look tiny, appear more as they really are. God created the universe to magnify His glory the way a telescope magnifies stars. Everything He does in our salvation is designed to magnify the glory of His grace like this.

Take, for example, some of the steps of our salvation: predestination, creation, incarnation, propitiation, sanctification, and consummation. At every step the Bible says God is doing these things, through Jesus Christ, to display and magnify His glory.

- *Predestination:* “He *predestined* us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, *to the praise of the glory* of His grace” (Ephesians 1:5–6).
- *Creation:* “Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth,

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everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created *for My glory*” (Isaiah 43:6–7).

- *Incarnation*: “Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles *to glorify God for His mercy*” (Romans 15:8–9).
- *Propitiation*:<sup>14</sup> “God displayed [Christ] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness*, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25).
- *Sanctification*: “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more...having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, *to the glory and praise of God*” (Philippians 1:9, 11).
- *Consummation*: “[Those who do not obey the gospel] will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes *to be glorified* in His saints on that day, and *to be marveled at* among all who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:9–10).

So I could not agree more with the person who says, “God created us and saves us for *His* glory!”

“Well, then,” my friend asks, “how can you say that the

aim of life is to maximize our joy? Didn't God create us to share His ultimate aim—to glorify Himself? Which is it? Are we created for His glory or for our joy?"

Here we are at the heart of Christian Hedonism! If you get anything, get this. I learned it from Jonathan Edwards, C. S. Lewis, and, most importantly, from the apostle Paul.

Edwards was the greatest pastor-theologian that America has ever produced. He wrote a book in 1755 called *The End for Which God Created the World*. The foundation and aim of that book is the following stunning insight. It is the deepest basis of Christian Hedonism. Read this old-fashioned English slowly to see Edwards's brilliant resolution.

*God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his...delight in it.<sup>15</sup>

This is the solution. Did God create you for *His* glory or for *your* joy? Answer: He created you so that you might spend eternity glorifying Him by enjoying Him forever. In other words, you do not have to choose between glorifying God and enjoying God. Indeed you dare not choose. If you forsake one, you lose the other. Edwards is absolutely right: “*God is glorified not only by His glory’s being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.*” If we do not rejoice in God, we do not glorify God as we ought.

Here is the rock-solid foundation of Christian Hedonism: *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.* This is the best news in the world. God’s passion to be glorified and my passion to be satisfied are not at odds.

You might turn your world on its head by changing one word in your creed—for example, changing *and* to *by*. The old Westminster Catechism asks, “What is man’s chief end?” It answers: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God *and* enjoy Him forever.”

*And?*

Are glorifying God and enjoying God two distinct things?

Evidently the old pastors who wrote the catechism didn’t think they were talking about two things. They said “chief end,” not “chief ends.” Glorifying God and enjoying Him were one end in their minds, not two.

The aim of Christian Hedonism is to show why this is so. It aims to show that we glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever. This is the essence of Christian Hedonism. *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.*

Perhaps you see now what drives me to be radical about this. If it is true, that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him, then look at what is at stake in our pursuit of joy. The glory of God is at stake! If I say that pursuing joy is not essential, I am saying that glorifying God is not essential. But if glorifying God is ultimately important, then pursuing the satisfaction that displays His glory is ultimately important.

Christian Hedonism is not a game. It is what the whole universe is about.

The radical implication is that pursuing pleasure in God is our highest calling. It is essential to all virtue and all reverence. Whether you think of your life vertically in relation to God or horizontally in relation to man, the pursuit of pleasure in God is crucial, not optional. We will see shortly that genuine love for people and genuine worship toward God hang on the pursuit of joy.

Before I saw these things in the Bible, C. S. Lewis snagged me when I wasn't looking. I was standing in Vroman's Bookstore on Colorado Avenue in Pasadena, California, in

the fall of 1968. I picked up a thin blue copy of Lewis's book *The Weight of Glory*. The first page changed my life.

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>16</sup>

Never in my life had I heard anyone say that the problem with the world was *not* the intensity of our pursuit of happiness, but the *weakness* of it. Everything in me shouted, *Yes! That's it!* There it was in black and white, and to my mind it was totally compelling: The great problem with human beings is that we are far too easily pleased. We don't seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and passion that we

should. And so we settle for mud pies of appetite instead of infinite delight.

Lewis said, “We are far too easily pleased.” Almost all of Christ’s commands are motivated by “the unblushing promises of reward.” Based on “the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.”

Yes. But what does that have to do with the praise and glory of God? Christian Hedonism says that not only must we pursue the joy that Jesus promises, but also that God Himself is glorified in this pursuit. Lewis helped me see this too.

There was another explosive page, this time from his book *Reflections on the Psalms*. Here he showed that the very nature of praise is the consummation of joy in what we admire.

The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me.... I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise...lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside.... My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we cannot help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.<sup>17</sup>

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So Lewis helped me put it all together. Pursuing joy in God and praising God are not separate acts. “Praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.” Worship is not added to joy, and joy is not the by-product of worship. Worship is the valuing of God. And when this valuing is intense, it is joy in God. Therefore the essence of worship is delight in God, which displays His all-satisfying value.

The apostle Paul clinched my Christian Hedonism with his testimony in Philippians 1. Here is the clearest biblical statement that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. From his imprisonment in Rome he writes:

My earnest expectation and hope [is] that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be

exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.  
 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.  
 (Philippians 1:20–21)

So his aim is that Christ be “exalted” or “magnified” or “glorified” in his body. He wants this to happen whether he lives or dies. In life and death his mission is to magnify Christ—to show that Christ is magnificent, to glorify Christ, to demonstrate that He is great. That’s clear from verse 20—that Christ “shall be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” The question is: *How* did he expect that to come about?

He shows us the answer in verse 21: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Notice how “live” and “die” in verse 21 correspond to “life” and “death” in verse 20. And the connection between the two verses is that verse 21 shows the basis of magnifying Christ by living and dying.

Verse 20

Christ will be exalted. . . . . because for me  
 whether by my life. . . . . to live is Christ  
 or my death. . . . . and to die is gain

Verse 21

Consider first the pair, “death” (verse 20) and “die” (verse 21): Christ may be exalted in my body by my death because for me to die is gain. Ponder that. Christ will be



exalted in my dying, if dying for me is gain. Do you see what this means about the way Christ is magnified? Christ is magnified by Paul's dying if Paul's dying is experienced as gain.

Why is that? It's because Christ Himself is the gain. Verse 23 makes this clear: "[My] desire [is] to depart [that is, to die] and be *with Christ*, for that is very much better." That is what death does for Christians: It takes us into more intimacy with Christ. We depart and we are with Christ, and that is gain. And when you experience death this way, Paul says, Christ is exalted in your body. Experiencing Christ as gain in your dying magnifies Christ. It is the essence of worship in the hour of death.

If you want to glorify Christ in your dying, you must experience death as gain. Which means Christ must be your prize, your treasure, your joy. He must be a satisfaction so deep that when death takes away everything you love—but gives you more of Christ—you count it gain. When you are satisfied with Christ in dying, He is gloried in your dying.

It's the same with life. We magnify Christ in life, Paul says, by experiencing Christ as our all-surpassing treasure. That's what he means in verse 21 when he says, "For to me, to live is Christ." We know this because in Philippians 3:8 Paul says, "I count all things to be loss in view of the sur-

passing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.”

So Paul’s point is that life and death, for a Christian, are acts of worship—they exalt Christ and magnify Him and reveal and express His greatness—when they come from an inner experience of treasuring Christ as gain. Christ is praised in death by being prized above life. And Christ is most glorified in life when we are most satisfied in Him even before death.

The common denominator between living and dying is that Christ is the all-satisfying treasure that we embrace whether we live or die. Christ is praised by being prized. He is magnified as a glorious treasure when He becomes our unrivaled pleasure. So if we are going to praise Him and magnify Him, we dare not be indifferent as to whether we prize Him and find pleasure in Him. If Christ’s honor is our passion, the pursuit of pleasure in Him is our duty.

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## *Chapter 3*



# AFFECTIONS ARE NOT OPTIONAL

Perhaps you can see why it is astonishing to me that so many people try to define true Christianity in terms of decisions and not affections. Not that decisions are unessential. The problem is that they require so little transformation. Mere decisions are no sure evidence of a true work of grace in the heart. People can make “decisions” about the truth of God while their hearts are far from Him.

We have moved far away from the biblical Christianity of Jonathan Edwards. He pointed to 1 Peter 1:8 and argued that “true religion, in great part, consists in the affections.”<sup>18</sup>

Though you have not seen Him, you love Him,  
and though you do not see Him now, but believe

in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. (1 Peter 1:8)

Throughout Scripture we are commanded to feel, not just to think or decide. We are commanded to experience dozens of emotions, not just to perform acts of willpower.

For example, God commands us not to covet (Exodus 20:17), and it is obvious that every commandment not to have a certain feeling is also a commandment to have a certain feeling. The opposite of covetousness is contentment, and this is exactly what we are commanded to experience in Hebrews 13:5: “Be content with what you have” (RSV).

God commands us to bear no grudge (Leviticus 19:18). The positive side of not bearing a grudge is forgiving “from the heart.” This is what Jesus commands us to do in Matthew 18:35: “Forgive [your] brother from your heart.” The Bible does not say, Make a mere decision to drop the grievance. It says, Experience a change in the heart. The Bible goes even further and commands a certain intensity. For example, 1 Peter 1:22 commands “Love one another *earnestly* from the heart” (RSV). And Romans 12:10 commands “Love one another *with brotherly affection*” (RSV).

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People are often troubled by the teaching of Christian Hedonism that emotions are part of our duty—that they are commanded. This seems strange partly because emotions are not under our immediate control like acts of willpower seem to be. But Christian Hedonism says, “Consider the Scriptures.” Emotions are commanded throughout the Bible.

The Scriptures command joy, hope, fear, peace, grief, desire, tenderheartedness, brokenness and contrition, gratitude, lowliness, etc.<sup>19</sup> Therefore Christian Hedonism is not making too much of emotion when it says that being satisfied in God is our calling and duty.

It is true that our hearts are often sluggish. We do not feel the depth or intensity of affections that are appropriate for God or His cause. It is true that at those times we must exert our wills and make decisions that we hope will rekindle our joy. Even though joyless love is not our aim (“God loves a cheerful giver!” 2 Corinthians 9:7; “[Show] mercy with cheerfulness,” Romans 12:8), nevertheless it is better to do a joyless duty than not to do it, provided that there is a spirit of repentance that we have not done all of our duty because of the sluggishness of our hearts.

I am often asked what a Christian should do if the cheerfulness of obedience is not there. It’s a good question. My answer is not to simply get on with your duty because

feelings don't matter. They do! My answer has three steps. First, confess the sin of joylessness. ("My heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I," Psalm 61:2.) Acknowledge the coldness of your heart. Don't say that it doesn't matter how you feel. Second, pray earnestly that God would restore the joy of obedience. ("I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart," Psalm 40:8.) Third, go ahead and do the outward dimension of your duty in the hope that the doing will rekindle the delight.

This is very different from saying: "Do your duty because feelings don't count." These steps assume that there is such a thing as hypocrisy. They are based on the belief that our goal is the reunion of pleasure and duty and that a justification of their separation is a justification of sin.

Yes, it becomes increasingly evident that the experience of joy in God is beyond what the sinful heart can do. It goes against our nature. We are enslaved to pleasure in other things (Romans 6:17). We can't just decide to be glad about something we find boring or uninteresting or offensive—like God. The making of a

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Christian Hedonist is a miracle of sovereign grace. This is why Paul said that becoming a Christian is the same as being raised from the dead (“even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ,” Ephesians 2:5). It’s why Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to stop loving his money and start loving God (Mark 10:25). Camels *can’t* go through needles’ eyes—just as dead men can’t wake themselves from the dead. So Jesus adds, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). So Christian Hedonism breeds an utter dependence on the sovereignty of God. It teaches us to hear the command, “Delight yourself in the LORD,” and then to pray with Saint Augustine, “Command what you wish, but give what you command.”<sup>20</sup>