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PREFACE

The Power of Living for God's Pleasure

The pursuit of happiness has become the great American obsession. But does any pleasure truly endure? There is nothing so inherently barren—nothing as cavernous and empty—as the pursuit of pleasure. At the end of every high school prom or wild spending spree comes the haunting question, “Is this all there is?” A great many heady romances end in the divorce court with the benumbed lovers shunning each other, made sick by the very sight of each other, and wailing in their lonely rooms, “I wanted more from life.”

All of this shadowy disappointment is pushed forward on bright waves of secular promotion. “Try our cream, our crumpets, our credit cards, our confidence schemes, our infomercials. Then you will be truly happy!” We buy the delirium. We want to feel the pleasure. Surely someone must know what will make us happy. We ourselves have no idea. So we trust, mortgage, mail in, spend, and buy. We live in pessimism committed to optimism. The next big deal will be the one that will last.

Having given ourselves to the pursuit of pleasure, we watch our joys grow elusive and degenerate into the customary routines of dullsville. Then time and again we ask ourselves, “Where did my pleasure and happiness go?”

By midlife too often every dream of pleasure is finally dead. I’m convinced that many people go on measuring out their lives with broken hope.

This book sets out to answer one question: Is there a pleasure that endures?

If so, can that pleasure transform our lives? Yes! “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy” (Psalm 147:11, NKJV). God is incapable of being morose. The pleasure of God grows as his children delight in serving him. But there exists an even greater axiom of human happiness: only when God is pleased with us can we ever be pleased with ourselves.

The Hebrews used the word *shalom*, a word usually translated “peace,” to signify their deep contentment with their God. His

shalom never left them at the mercy of the world at hand. The Arabs have the same word, which they pronounce *salaam*. Menachem Begin said upon signing the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Accord, “No more wars, no more bloodshed. Peace unto you. Shalom, salaam, forever.”¹ Faith in God’s *shalom* puts him in charge of the tangled instances of our lives. We were made to love Christ, and our loving him pleases God. Then as his pleasure falls over us, we are given all the power we need to handle the strangling circumstances that choke the purpose from our dreams. This new sense that God is pleased with us dances his wonderful *shalom* into our souls. God smiles and we are set free from the shackles of believing that what anyone else thinks matters. We live for God’s pleasure alone.

This wonderful feeling of rightness—this deep, abiding *shalom*—comes as a special prize of the pleasure of God. God has smiled! No matter then if all the world should frown at us. When God is pleased with us, who

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could ever keep us from finding self-worth? God wants us to live beneath his smile. He wants us to feel the pleasure he takes in our obedience. So shalom has two sides—a heavenly side and an earthly side. Pleasure is God’s side of the great shalom. Joy is our side. When the pleasure of heaven lights our days, joy becomes our way of life. In God’s wonderful shalom, we wake to wonder. The sky is bluer, the earth is greener. Symphonies become the soundtrack of our ordinary days. The dirge becomes a mad dance. All bread is cake. And our ritual sunrise worship is this: “Hallelujah thou great Shalom! Is all this for me, God?”

God’s pleasure and our joy are the two great chords in the symphony of transformed living. Jesus himself is the Master of the Dance, and the joy we feel comes directly from the pleasure God takes in our obedience. Morning by morning there is manna on the ground. Evening by evening, we hear the king of heaven inviting us to a fling of joy. We have obeyed, God has smiled, the music flies!

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“On with the dance! Let joy be
unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and
Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing hours with flying
feet.”

*Lord Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto iii.,
Stanza 22.*



ELIJAH
A STUDY
IN PLEASURE
AND POWER

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Elijah was a person of power. His name is a gathering of Hebrew particles that, when assembled, mean, "God is the LORD." Elijah took a lonely stand for God in a most unpopu-

WHEN WE WIN
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ACHIEVE.

lar place. His foes were the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal who lived at the queen's court. All of these worshiped the easy, accessible gods of money and sexual indulgence.

Baal was a calf of gold. He lured his adorers to seek wealth. But he was not so much a calf as he was a pagan bull conferring sexual indulgence on the lusty and self-willed souls who bowed at his altar.

Elijah preached the great God of requirement. Yahweh was his covenant name, and he demanded self-denial and the high adoration of surrender and confession. So when the confrontation came, Elijah stood on the moun-

tain to cry to his idolatrous culture: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21, NKJV).

Elijah and God were a force of two. They were far outnumbered by the priests of public opinion. Elijah challenged the prophets of the false god to a duel. The prophets of Baal set their sacrifices before their golden bull. Elijah laid his sacrifice before Jehovah. The gauntlet of the gods was cast. The god who answered by fire would be God.

God smiled above his gallant and fearless, willing-to-stand-alone prophet. There were flames everywhere—flames that lapped up even the water in the trenches. And the pleasure of God awoke a storm of power within Elijah. The fire fell! God smiled on! Elijah ran ahead of Ahab’s chariot all the way to Jezreel.

When we win God’s pleasure, we release within ourselves the power to achieve. Elijah won God’s pleasure, and it released in him the

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power to run. But how do we win God's pleasure? Exactly as Elijah did. We agree to obey even at those moments when obedience requires everything of us. For Elijah, to obey was to stand alone, to risk the forfeiture of his life.

Let us enter into the exciting world of godly obedience. Our obedience will win the smile of God, and the smile of God will give us the power to make our world an arena of self-confidence. Always? Yes—no matter what our obedience may cost us! For it is impossible to think ill of ourselves when God is smiling on our obedience. In fact the entire Bible is a collection of true tales of men and women possessed with the idea of pleasing God.

Noah built a boat in the midst of ridicule and won the pleasure of God.

Esther risked her life to know his pleasure.

Stephen cherished truth in the face of flying stones and won the pleasure of God.

There are many virtues that grow out of

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our obedience. Joy, peace, and gratitude are three of the best. But perhaps the finest evidence of our obedience is self-confidence. When I am in business solely to serve and please God, his smile settles on me as power.

I am not talking here about the power of the Spirit. That is power indeed and always comes as a companion force to the power of his pleasure. The power of the Spirit falls upon us to enable us to widen his kingdom and serve the world Christ died to save. But the power of God's pleasure is the power of a vibrant attitude that gives us a radiant winsomeness while we serve the Spirit. So for now let us talk of obedience power. I have but to obey to win his pleasure—then hell sways weakly in my pathway. I, who am only me, am more than me.

I am on Mt. Carmel.

I take my stand.

God smiles.

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I became the final extension of his smile.

I can do all things through Christ.

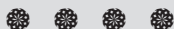
All things? How? What makes it happen?

God is smiling.

The world is wax before such a flame.

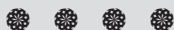


INTRODUCTION



When I feel the presence of God, it feels like drafting a big truck. It feels like my prayer goes from being pushed along by a little put-put engine to being pulled by a monster diesel. The reason prayer feels like drafting a truck rather than just getting a bigger engine is that when I feel the presence of God, it feels like I am being pulled by something that I'm close to but can't touch. My feet are still on the ground, but I feel like I am being lifted. My steps feel lighter. I walk faster but much less deliberately. My thinking focuses. Far from being an irrational, ecstatic phenomenon, in this state my rational process leaps forward from point to point, as if I am bounding through a field of high grass on the back of a lion, holding his mane and laughing with glee. No matter what I was praying about, whether I feel an answer or not, all I can do is praise and thank God. I always think best when I am worshiping God.

—DAVID HANSEN²



THE PLEASURE OF SERVING GOD

To serve God is to serve others. There is nothing we can do for God directly. What could we possibly draw from our crude hovels to furnish his palace? This world's millionaires are heaven's lepers. If we would please him, we must serve not only those whose needs are convenient for us to address but also those whose needs are greater than ours—we must serve all who are within the reach of our supply. *Do* instead of talk, said James (James 1:22). Don't call me Lord without obeying me, said Jesus (Matthew 7:21). "Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later," says Ecclesiastes 11:1. God is so much in love with us that we have but to serve him in the most modest of ways to be sure that we have pleased him.

We win the pleasure of God through ministry. Teresa of Calcutta speaks for the Christ of Matthew 25. To do any needful thing in the name of love is to do it unto Jesus. Bandage a

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leper, and you swathe the Son of God. Feed the starving a bowl of steaming soup, and the meal is served piping hot to Jesus.

I have a missionary friend who serves in

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Calcutta. During Mother Teresa's final years, he actually had the opportunity to visit with her. He noticed after one of their talks that many of the homeless of Calcutta were insane. There were no hospitals for them. They lived pretty much as they had in medieval times. They wandered the streets at midnight in search of bread. So this missionary began buying loaves of day-old bread. When he saw

homeless people approaching, he scattered the loaves in the streets where they would

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shortly pass. His delight came in seeing them discover the food. When they did, they greedily ate. His unseen feeding of these mindless men and women filled him with the sensation of Matthew 25:40, “I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!” He learned Mother Teresa’s lesson. It wasn’t the demented guttersnipes he fed at midnight, it was the Son of God.

He discovered a liberating truth. This is heaven’s blessed paradox: Christ can do anything, yet he waits on us to give him hands. He has forgone the use of his own hands to get things done. Jesus, the all-powerful, has willed himself to be the Almighty Amputee of Heaven, waiting for us to give him hands so he can serve his starving family. He graces us with his dependency. Yet how frequently we leave him handless. How rarely we reach out to others. When we do, our hands are often claws of greed. We use them

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to rake the good stuff of life into our own glutted accounts and bulging treasuries.

Materialism has become the obstruction in our pathway to God's pleasure. We are both our old, preconversion, selfish selves and God's new child living together in one conflicted soul. "I do not understand what I do," said the apostle Paul. "For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me. . . . What a wretched man I am!"

(Romans 7:15-24, NIV). Wretched are we all! James said we are double-minded. We want to serve God, but we also want to "do our thing" for our own achievement. James' word for double-minded really means two-souled (*dipsuchos*, James 1:8 NIV). Shakespeare's Gertrude saw that she was double-minded and freely admitted to Hamlet, "O, Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain." Hamlet well advised her, "O, throw away the worser part

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of it, and live the purer with the other half”
(III, iv, 163-165).

Hamlet has our number: we are ever two
people. The first and worst is committed to
our own pleasure. The second is committed to
God’s pleasure. It is important to decide
which of these two selves we really are.

Within my earthly temple, there’s a crowd;
There’s one of us that’s humble, one
that’s proud;
There’s one that’s broken-hearted for
his sins;
There’s one that unrepentant, sits
and grins;
There’s one that loves his neighbor
as himself
And one that cares for not but
fame and self.
From much corroding care I
should be free
If I could once determine which is me.”

—EDWARD SANFORD MARTIN³

CHAPTER ONE



SEE GOD AS YOUR
FATHER, CAPABLE
OF PRIDE AND
DISAPPOINTMENT



*Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health,
in 1737, having alighted 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.*

—JONATHAN EDWARDS⁵



LIVING FOR GOD'S PLEASURE

Most Christians live in weakness, never knowing the power of God's pleasure. The reason for this unfortunate reality is obvious: they have never seen God as capable of heavy "human" emotions toward them. Is God human? Of course not. No more than a mere human could ever be divine. But God is a person. He knows all the emotions of being human. He created human emotion, and he enters into relationship with us humans.

How he feels about us, therefore, should be understood in the same way we feel about him. Do we feel pride and love? Of course! God has these same feelings toward us.

Scripture abounds with references to God's feelings. There are more than one hundred verses that speak of God's being pleased with us or taking pleasure in our obedience. But I would like to focus on just one: "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32, NKJV).

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Like any parent, God feels joy when he is able to give his children the gifts he longs to lavish upon them. Our obedience releases in us his

most pleasing gift—the power of his pleasure.

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How powerful is his pleasure? People who believe they are pleasing God accomplish two things. First, they feel good about themselves. Second, perhaps without even knowing it, they help change the world for the better. Every time a disease is eliminated, a war truced,

a temple erected, a bridge built, or a child rescued, someone, somewhere is confident he has made God smile. God's smile sets ordinary mortals down at the banquet of the Father.

"Let there be sung 'Non Nobis,' " said Henry V, referring to the Latin hymn "*Non nobis*

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Domine, sed nomini, tuo da gloriam.” Not to us
O Lord, but unto you be all the glory.

An old man who swept the flourmill floor in my hometown paid for my second year of college anonymously. I received it, but I did not know for thirty years who gave me such a gift. I met this silent benefactor at mother’s funeral. By this time he was a very old man. My eyes filled with tears as he said to me (in English of course), *Non nobis Domine, sed nomini, tuo da gloriam.* “Look up to God, he has furnished this feast, and you were worth every mouthful of joy that God gave me to devour.” I have been warmed often by the power of the old man’s pleasure, for I knew it was the power of God. He was convinced he had done nothing admirable—he had but obeyed God. It was the only course open to him as an obedient child. His obedience had brought him great pleasure because it had brought God pleasure. The pleasure of the Father is all that matters.

HURTING THE HEART OF GOD

Our obedience brings God pleasure, which brings us pleasure. Conversely, when we are disobedient, we hurt God. It took me a long time to realize that God didn't just get mad when I sinned; he was hurt. Perhaps we have to have children of our own to truly realize this. I'm not sure that our children ever see that their sin does not anger their parents so much as it hurts them. When we finally do understand this, often not until adulthood, we take a giant stride in our maturity.

The apostle Paul begs us not to hurt the heart of God. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God," he says, "by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, NKJV). Grieve is a love word, not a term of judgment. That is to say, that our indifference to what God wants from us does not make him mad, it injures him. That is not to say he will not punish us; he will. But before we ever stir his indignation, we call forth his tender love. We

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break his heart in grief before we ever make him angry.

How foolish we are to fear his anger. We have far too much trembled before the “God’s gonna get you” syndrome.

My mother, who raised me and my eight other siblings, mostly as a single parent, was a believer in chastening us children. Chastening in Oklahoma was called “gettin’ a lickin’.” We feared making her mad, for it always seemed to be hazardous to our health. It seemed that when she came through the door with a plaster lath or a peach switch in her hand, it was wise to pray fervently for the Second Coming. Better history should end than our frail lives.

As I grew older, I began to sense that following our tears, it was she who was really crying. The odd sensation of seeing my mother cry became the best incentive to my good behavior. I hated to see her cry. While her smile was the diamond at the center of all my self-esteem, her tears were terrible to me.

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I needed her pleasure to live. I spent it like hard cash to purchase my joy. I eventually came to the place where I outgrew the “momma’s gonna get you” fear. I replaced it with, “I will never again hurt this wonderful, self-giving person.” I literally lived to bring her pleasure.

So it is with God.

In every moral choice, we have not merely our own disappointments to consider. In our every choice we either grieve or please God. God is our Father, and he is always grieved by our selfishness. While he is in this state of grief, we live powerless lives, marked by no effervescence of spirit.

But when we are broken, we elicit the pleasure of God. “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,” says the psalmist (Psalm 34:18). Indeed he caresses their pain until it is transformed to joy: “He heals the brokenhearted, binding up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3). Our own contrition always precedes our joy. Why?

NOTES

1. Menachem Begin, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, ed. Justin Kaplan (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1992) , 732.9-10.
2. David Hansen, *Long Wandering Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 158-159.
3. Edward Sanford Martin, in Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 27.
4. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Fifth Letter.
5. Jonathan Edwards, in David Hansen, *Long Wandering Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 42.
6. Thomas à Kempis, *Come, Lord Jesus*, ed. David Hazard (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 146.
7. Herman Hesse, in Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 69.
8. Robert Benson, *Living Prayer* (New York: Tarcher Putnam, 1998), 14.