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DON'T WASTE

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YOUR LIFE.

John Piper

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Don't Waste Your Life (Group Study Edition)

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To
Louie Giglio
*and the passion of his heart
for the renown of Jesus Christ
in this generation*

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PREFACE

For Christians and Non-Christians

The Bible says, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). I have written this book to help you taste those words as sweet instead of bitter or boring.

You are in one of two groups: Either you are a Christian, or God is now calling you to be one. You would not have picked up this book if God were not at work in your life.

If you are a Christian, you are not your own. Christ has bought you at the price of his own death. You now belong doubly to God: He made you, and he bought you. That means your life is not your own. It is God’s. Therefore, the Bible says, “Glorify God in your body.” God made you for this. He bought you for this. This is the meaning of your life.

If you are not yet a Christian, that is what Jesus Christ offers: doubly belonging to God, and being able to do what you were made for. That may not sound exciting. Glorifying God may mean nothing to you. That’s why I tell my story in the first two chapters, called “Created for Joy.” It was not always plain to me that pursuing God’s glory would be virtually the same as purs-

ing my joy. Now I see that millions of people waste their lives because they think these paths are two and not one.

There is a warning. The path of God-exalting joy will cost you your life. Jesus said, “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” In other words, it is better to lose your life than to waste it. If you live gladly to make others glad in God, your life will be hard, your risks will be high, and your joy will be full. This is not a book about how to avoid a wounded life, but how to avoid a *wasted* life. Some of you will die in the service of Christ. That will not be a tragedy. Treasuring life above Christ is a tragedy.

Please know that I am praying for you, whether you are a student dreaming something radical for your life, or whether you are retired and hoping not to waste the final years. If you wonder what I am praying, read Chapter 10. That is my prayer.

For now, I thank God for you. My joy grows with every soul that seeks the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Remember, you have one life. That’s all. You were made for God. Don’t waste it.

March 31, 2003
John Piper

CHAPTER 1

MY SEARCH FOR A SINGLE PASSION TO LIVE BY

My father was an evangelist. In fact he still is, even though he doesn't travel now. When I was a boy, there were rare occasions when my mother and sister and I traveled with him and heard him preach. I trembled to hear my father preach. In spite of the predictable opening humor, the whole thing struck me as absolutely blood-earnest. There was a certain squint to his eye and a tightening of his lips when the avalanche of biblical texts came to a climax in application.

“I’VE WASTED IT, I’VE WASTED IT”

Oh, how he would plead! Children, teenagers, young singles, young married people, the middle-aged, old people—he would press the warnings and the woings of Christ into the heart of each person. He had stories, so many stories, for each age group—stories of glorious conversions, and stories of horrific refusals to believe followed by tragic deaths. Seldom could those stories come without tears.

For me as a boy, one of the most gripping illustrations my

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fiery father used was the story of a man converted in old age. The church had prayed for this man for decades. He was hard and resistant. But this time, for some reason, he showed up when my father was preaching. At the end of the service, during a hymn, to everyone's amazement he came and took my father's hand. They sat down together on the front pew of the church as the people were dismissed. God opened his heart to the Gospel of Christ, and he was saved from his sins and given eternal life. But that did not stop him from sobbing and saying, as the tears ran down his wrinkled face—and what an impact it made on me to hear my father say this through his own tears—“I've wasted it! I've wasted it!”

This was the story that gripped me more than all the stories of young people who died in car wrecks before they were converted—the story of an old man weeping that he had wasted his life. In those early years God awakened in me a fear and a passion not to waste my life. The thought of coming to my old age and saying through tears, “I've wasted it! I've wasted it!” was a fearful and horrible thought to me.

“ONLY ONE LIFE, 'TWILL SOON BE PAST”

Another riveting force in my young life—small at first, but oh so powerful over time—was a plaque that hung in our kitchen over the sink. We moved into that house when I was six. So I suppose I looked at the words on that plaque almost every day for twelve years, till I went away to college at age eighteen. It was a simple piece of glass painted black on the back with a gray link chain snug around it for a border and for hanging. On the front, in old English script, painted in white, were the words:

*Only one life,
'Twill soon be past;
Only what's done
for Christ will last.*

To the left, beside these words, was a painted green hill with two trees and a brown path that disappeared over the hill. How many times, as a little boy, and then as a teenager with pimples and longings and anxieties, I looked at that brown path (my life) and wondered what would be over that hill. The message was clear. You get one pass at life. That's all. Only one. And the lasting measure of that life is Jesus Christ. I am fifty-seven as I write, and that very plaque hangs today on the wall by our front door. I see it every time I leave home.

What would it mean to waste my life? That was a burning question. Or, more positively, what would it mean to live well—not to waste life, but to . . . ? How to finish that sentence was *the* question. I was not even sure how to put the question into words, let alone what the answer might be. What was the opposite of not wasting my life? “To be successful in a career”? Or “to be maximally happy”? Or “to accomplish something great”? Or “to find the deepest meaning and significance”? Or “to help as many people as possible”? Or “to serve Christ to the full”? Or “to glorify God in all I do”? Or was there a point, a purpose, a focus, an essence to life that would fulfill every one of those dreams?

“THE LOST YEARS”

I had forgotten how weighty this question was for me until I looked through my files from those early years. Just when I was about to leave my South Carolina home in 1964, never to return as a resident, Wade Hampton High School published a simple literary magazine of poems and stories. Near the back, with the byline Johnny Piper, was a poem. I will spare you. It was not a good poem. Jane, the editor, was merciful. What matters to me now was the title and first four lines. It was called “The Lost Years.” Beside it was a sketch of an old man in a rocking chair. The poem began:

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*Long I sought for the earth's hidden meaning;
Long as a youth was my search in vain.
Now as I approach my last years waning,
My search I must begin again.*

Across the forty years that separate me from that poem I can hear the fearful refrain, “I’ve wasted it! I’ve wasted it!” Somehow there had been awakened in me a passion for the essence and the main point of life. The ethical question “whether something is permissible” faded in relation to the question, “what is the main thing, the essential thing?” The thought of building a life around minimal morality or minimal significance—a life defined by the question, “What is permissible?”—felt almost disgusting to me. I didn’t want a minimal life. I didn’t want to live on the outskirts of reality. I wanted to understand the main thing about life and pursue it.

EXISTENTIALISM WAS THE AIR WE BREATHED

The passion not to miss the *essence* of life, not to waste it, intensified in college—the tumultuous late sixties. There were strong reasons for this, reasons that go well beyond the inner turmoil of one boy coming of age. “Essence” was under assault almost everywhere. Existentialism was the air we breathed. And the meaning of existentialism was that “existence precedes essence.” That is, first you exist and then, by existing, you create your essence. You make your essence by freely choosing to be what you will be. There is no essence outside you to pursue or conform to. Call it “God” or “Meaning” or “Purpose”—it is not there until you create it by your own courageous existence. (If you furrow your brow and think, “This sounds strangely like our own day and what we call postmodernism,” don’t be surprised. There is nothing new under the sun. There are only endless repackagings.)

I recall sitting in a darkened theater watching the theatrical offspring of existentialism, the “theater of the absurd.” The play was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon meet under a tree and converse as they wait for Godot. He never comes. Near the end of the play a boy tells them Godot will not be coming. They decide to leave but never move. They go nowhere. The curtain falls, and God[ot] never comes.

That was Beckett’s view of people like me—waiting, seeking, hoping to find the *Essence* of things, instead of creating my own essence with my free and unbridled existence. Nowhere—that’s where you’re going, he implied, if you pursue some transcendent Point or Purpose or Focus or Essence.

“THE NOWHERE MAN”

The Beatles released their album *Rubber Soul* in December 1965 and sang out their existentialism with compelling power for my generation. Perhaps it was clearest in John Lennon’s “Nowhere Man.”

*He’s a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans
For nobody
Doesn’t have a point of view
Knows not where he’s going to
Isn’t he a bit like you and me?*

These were heady days, especially for college students. And, thankfully, God was not silent. Not everybody gave way to the lure of the absurd and the enticement of heroic emptiness. Not everyone caved in to the summons of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Even voices without root in the Truth knew that there must be something more—something outside ourselves,

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something bigger and greater and more worth living for than what we saw in the mirror.

THE ANSWER, THE ANSWER WAS BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Bob Dylan was scratching out songs with oblique messages of hope that exploded on the scene precisely because they hinted at a Reality that would not keep us waiting forever. Things would change. Sooner or later the slow would be fast and the first would be last. And it would not be because we were existential masters of our absurd fate. It would come to us. That is what we all felt in the song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

*The line it is drawn,
The curse it is cast,
The slow one now
Will later be fast.
As the present now
Will later be past,
The order is
Rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now
Will later be last,
For the times they are a-changin'.*

It must have riled the existentialists to hear Dylan, perhaps without even knowing it, sweep away their everything-goes relativism with the audacious double "*The answer . . . The answer*" in the smash hit, "Blowin' in the Wind."

*How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
Yes, 'n' how many ears must
one man have*

*Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take
till he knows
That too many people have died?
The answer, my friend,
is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

How many times can a man look up and not see the sky? There is a sky up there to be seen. You may look up ten thousand times and say you don't see it. But that has absolutely no effect on its objective existence. It is there. And one day you will see it. How many times must you look up before you see it? There is an answer. *The answer, The answer, my friend*, is not yours to invent or create. It will be decided for you. It is outside you. It is real and objective and firm. One day you will hear it. You don't create it. You don't define it. It comes to you, and sooner or later you conform to it—or bow to it.

That is what I heard in Dylan's song, and everything in me said, Yes! There is an Answer with a capital A. To miss it would mean a wasted life. To find it would mean having a unifying Answer to all my questions.

The little brown path over the green hill on our kitchen plaque was winding its way—all through the sixties—among the sweet snares of intellectual folly. Oh, how courageous my generation seemed when they stepped off the path and put their foot in the trap! Some could even muster the moxie to boast, "I have chosen the way of freedom. I have created my own existence. I have shaken loose the old laws. Look how my leg is severed!"

THE MAN WITH LONG HAIR AND KNICKERS

But God was graciously posting compelling warnings along the way. In the fall of 1965 Francis Schaeffer delivered a week

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of lectures at Wheaton College that in 1968 became the book, *The God Who Is There*.¹ The title shows the stunning simplicity of the thesis. God is there. Not *in here*, defined and shaped by my own desires. God is *out there*. Objective. Absolute Reality (which Schaeffer pronounced something like “Reawity”). All that looks like reality to us is dependent on God. There is creation and Creator, nothing more. And creation gets all its meaning and purpose from God.

Here was an absolutely compelling road sign. Stay on the road of objective truth. This will be the way to avoid wasting your life. Stay on the road that your fiery evangelist father was on. Don't forsake the plaque on your kitchen wall. Here was weighty intellectual confirmation that life would be wasted in the grasslands of existentialism. Stay on the road. There is Truth. There is a Point and Purpose and Essence to it all. Keep searching. You will find it.

I suppose there is no point lamenting that one must spend his college years learning the obvious—that there is Truth, that there is objective being and objective value. Like a fish going to school to learn that there is water, or a bird that there is air, or a worm that there is dirt. But it seems that, for the last two hundred years or so, this has been the main point of good education. And its opposite is the essence of bad education. So I don't lament the years I spent learning the obvious.

THE MAN WHO TAUGHT ME TO SEE

Indeed, I thank God for professors and writers who devoted tremendous creative energies to render credible the existence of trees and water and souls and love and God. C. S. Lewis, who died the same day as John F. Kennedy in 1963 and who taught English at Oxford, walked up over the horizon of my little brown path in 1964 with such blazing brightness that it is hard to overstate the impact he had on my life.

Someone introduced me to Lewis my freshman year with the book, *Mere Christianity*.² For the next five or six years I was almost never without a Lewis book near at hand. I think that without his influence I would not have lived my life with as much joy or usefulness as I have. There are reasons for this.

He has made me wary of chronological snobbery. That is, he showed me that newness is no virtue and oldness is no vice. Truth and beauty and goodness are not determined by when they exist. Nothing is inferior for being old, and nothing is valuable for being modern. This has freed me from the tyranny of novelty and opened for me the wisdom of the ages. To this day I get most of my soul-food from centuries ago. I thank God for Lewis's compelling demonstration of the obvious.

He demonstrated for me and convinced me that rigorous, precise, penetrating logic is not opposed to deep, soul-stirring feeling and vivid, lively—even playful—imagination. He was a “romantic rationalist.” He combined things that almost everybody today assumes are mutually exclusive: rationalism and poetry, cool logic and warm feeling, disciplined prose and free imagination. In shattering these old stereotypes, he freed me to think hard and to write poetry, to argue for the resurrection and compose hymns to Christ, to smash an argument and hug a friend, to demand a definition and use a metaphor.

Lewis gave me an intense sense of the “realness” of things. The preciousness of this is hard to communicate. To wake up in the morning and be aware of the firmness of the mattress, the warmth of the sun's rays, the sound of the clock ticking, the sheer being of things (“quiddity” as he calls it³). He helped me become alive to life. He helped me see what is there in the world—things that, if we didn't have, we would pay a million dollars to have, but having them, ignore. He made me more alive to beauty. He put my soul on notice that there are daily wonders that will waken worship if I open my eyes. He shook my dozing

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soul and threw the cold water of reality in my face, so that life and God and heaven and hell broke into my world with glory and horror.

He exposed the sophisticated intellectual opposition to objective being and objective value for the naked folly that it was. The philosophical king of my generation had no clothes on, and the writer of children's books from Oxford had the courage to say so.

You can't go on "seeing through" things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.⁴

Oh, how much more could be said about the world as C. S. Lewis saw it and the way he spoke. He has his flaws, some of them serious. But I will never cease to thank God for this remarkable man who came onto my path at the perfect moment.

A FIANCÉE IS A STUBBORNLY OBJECTIVE FACT

There was another force that solidified my unwavering belief in the unbending existence of objective reality. Her name was Noël Henry. I fell in love with her in the summer of 1966. Way too soon probably. But it has turned out okay; I still love her. Nothing sobers a wandering philosophical imagination like the thought of having a wife and children to support.

We were married in December 1968. It is a good thing to do one's thinking in relation to real people. From that moment

on, every thought has been a thought in relationship. Nothing is merely an idea, but an idea that bears on my wife, then later, on my five children. I thank God for the parable of Christ and the church that I have been obliged to live these thirty-five years. There are lessons in life—the unwasted life—that I would probably never have learned without this relationship (just as there are lessons in lifelong singleness that will probably be learned no other way).

I BLESS YOU, MONO, FOR MY LIFE

In the fall of 1966 God was closing in with an ever narrowing path for my life. When he made his next decisive move, Noël wondered where I had gone. The fall semester had started, and I did not show up in classes or in chapel. Finally she found me, flat on my back with mononucleosis in the health center, where I lay for three weeks. The life plan that I was so sure of four months earlier unraveled in my fevered hands.

In May I had felt a joyful confidence that my life would be most useful as a medical doctor. I loved biology; I loved the idea of healing people. I loved knowing, at last, what I was doing in college. So I quickly took general chemistry in summer school so I could catch up and take organic chemistry that fall.

Now with mono, I had missed three weeks of organic chemistry. There was no catching up. But even more important, Harold John Ockenga, then pastor of Park Street Church in Boston, was preaching in chapel each morning during the spiritual emphasis week. I was listening on WETN, the college radio station. Never had I heard exposition of the Scriptures like this. Suddenly all the glorious objectivity of Reality centered for me on the Word of God. I lay there feeling as if I had awakened from a dream, and knew, now that I was awake, what I was to do.

Noël came to visit, and I said, “What would you think if I didn’t pursue a medical career but instead went to seminary?”

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As with every other time I've asked that kind of question through the years, the answer was, "If that's where God leads you, that's where I'll go." From that moment on I have never doubted that my calling in life is to be a minister of the Word of God.

NOTES

- 1 Schaeffer's prophetic work remains incredibly relevant to our age. I'd encourage every one of my readers to read at least one work by Schaeffer. A good place to begin with the "best of the best" is *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason, and He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990).
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 199.
- 4 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 91.

CHAPTER 2

BREAKTHROUGH—THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST, MY JOY

In 1968 I had no idea what it would mean for me to be a minister of the Word. Being a pastor was as far from my expectations as being a pastor's wife was from Noël's. What then? Would it mean being a teacher, a missionary, a writer, maybe a professor of literature with good theology? All I knew was that ultimate Reality had suddenly centered for me on the Word of God. The great Point and Purpose and Essence that I longed to link up with was now connected unbreakably with the Bible. The mandate was clear: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15). For me, that meant seminary, with a focus on understanding and rightly handling the Bible.

LEARNING NOT TO CUT OFF MY OWN HEAD

The battle to learn the obvious continued. The modern assault on reality—that there exists a real objective reality outside ourselves that can be truly known—had turned Bible study into a

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swamp of subjectivity. You could see it in the church as small groups shared their subjective impressions about what Bible texts meant “for me” without an anchor in any original meaning. And you could see it in academic books as creative scholars cut their own heads off by arguing that texts have no objective meaning.

If there is only one life to live in this world, and if it is not to be wasted, nothing seemed more important to me than finding out what God really meant in the Bible, since he inspired men to write it. If that was up for grabs, then no one could tell which life is worthy and which life is wasted. I was stunned at the gamesmanship in the scholarly world as authors used all their intellectual powers to nullify what they themselves wrote! That is, they expressed theories of meaning that argued there is no single, valid meaning in texts. Ordinary people reading this book will (I hope) find this incredible. I don't blame you. It is. But the fact remains that to this day well-paid, well-fed professors use tuition and tax dollars to argue that “since literature does not accurately convey reality, literary interpretation need not accurately convey the reality which is literature.”¹

In other words, since we can't know objective reality outside ourselves, there can be no objective meaning in what we write either. So interpretation does not mean trying to find any objective thing that an author put in a text, but simply means that we express the ideas that enter our head as we read. Which doesn't really matter because when others read what we have written, they won't have any access to our intention either. It's all a game. Only it is sinister, because all these scholars (and small-group members) insist that their own love letters and contracts be measured by one rule: what they intended to say. Any mumbo-jumbo about creatively hearing “yes” when I wrote “no” will not go down at the bank or the marriage counselor.

And so it was that Existentialism came home to roost in the

Bible: Existence precedes essence. That is, I don't *find* meaning—I *create* it. The Bible is a lump of clay, and I am the potter. Interpretation is creation. My existence as a subject creates the “essence” of the object. Don't laugh. They were serious. They still are. Today it just has other names.

DEFENDING THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE BROAD-DAY SUN

Into this morass of subjectivity came a Professor of Literature from the University of Virginia, E. D. Hirsch. Reading his book *Validity in Interpretation* during my seminary years was like suddenly finding a rock under my feet in the quicksand of contemporary concepts about meaning. Like most of the guides God sent along my path, Hirsch defended the obvious. Yes, he argued, there *does* exist an original meaning that a writer had in his mind when he wrote. And yes, valid interpretation seeks that intention in the text and gives good reasons for claiming to see it. This seemed as obvious to me as the broad-day sun. It was everybody's assumption in daily life when they spoke or wrote.

Perhaps even more important, it seemed courteous. None of us wants our notes and letters and contracts interpreted differently than we intend them. Therefore, common courtesy, or the Golden Rule, requires that we read others the way we would be read. It seemed to me that much philosophical talk about meaning was just plain hypocritical: At the university I undermine objective meaning, but at home (and at the bank) I insist on it. I wanted no part of that game. It looked like an utterly wasted life. If there is no valid interpretation based on real objective, unchanging, original meaning, then my whole being said, “Let us eat, drink, and be merry. But by no means let us treat scholarship as if it really matters.”

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THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE DEATH OF MEANING

Things were coming together. On a cold October afternoon back in 1965 at Wheaton College I had taken the new *Time* Magazine to a second-floor corner of the library and read the cover story: “Is God Dead?” (October 22, 1965). “Christian atheists” like Thomas J. J. Altizer answered, yes. It was not new news. Friedrich Nietzsche had given the obituary a hundred years earlier: “Whither is God? . . . I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him.”² It was a costly confession: Nietzsche spent the last eleven years of his life in a semi-catatonic state and died in 1900.

But the courageous “Christian atheists” of the sixties did not compute the costs of being God’s replacement as supermen (which Nietzsche called them). The strong drink of Existentialism loosened the tongues of those creative theologians, like the men five rows back in the airplane after too many beers. So the suicidal assertion that God is dead was spoken again. And when God died, the meaning of texts died. If the basis of objective reality dies, then writing and speaking about objective reality die. It all hangs together.

So my deliverance in the late sixties from the madness of killing God led naturally in the early seventies to my deliverance from the hypocritical emptiness of hermeneutical subjectivism—the two-faced notion that there is no objective meaning in any sentence (but this one). Now I was ready for the real work of seminary: finding what the Bible said about how not to waste my life.

LEARNING THE “SEVERE DISCIPLINE” OF READING THE BIBLE

My debt at this point to Daniel Fuller is incalculable. He taught hermeneutics—the science of how to interpret the Bible. Not

only did he introduce me to E. D. Hirsch and force me to read him with rigor, but he also taught me how to read the Bible with what Matthew Arnold called “severe discipline.” He showed me the obvious: that the verses of the Bible are not strung pearls but links in a chain. The writers developed unified patterns of thought. They reasoned. “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isaiah 1:18). This meant that, in each paragraph of Scripture, one should ask how each part related to the other parts in order to say one coherent thing. Then the paragraphs should be related to each other in the same way. And then the chapters, then the books, and so on until the unity of the Bible is found on its own terms.

I felt like my little brown path of life had entered an orchard, a vineyard, a garden with mind-blowing, heart-thrilling, life-changing fruit to be picked everywhere. Never had I seen so much truth and so much beauty condensed in so small a sphere. The Bible seemed to me then, and it seems today, inexhaustible. This is what I had dreamed about in the health center with mono, when God called me to the ministry of the Word. Now the question became: What is the Point, the Purpose, the Focus, the Essence of this beautiful glimpse of divine Truth?

A GLIMPSE OF WHY I AND EVERYTHING EXIST

In course after course the pieces were put in place. What a gift those three years of seminary were! In the final class with Dr. Fuller, called “The Unity of the Bible” (which is also a book by that title³) the unifying flag was hoisted over the whole Bible.

God ordained a redemptive history whose sequence fully displays his glory so that, at the end, the greatest possible number of people would have had the historical antecedents necessary to engender [the most] fervent love for God. . . . The one thing God is doing in all of redemptive history is to

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show forth his mercy in such a way that the greatest number of people will throughout eternity delight in him with all their heart, strength, and mind. . . . When the earth of the new creation is filled with such people, then God's purpose in showing forth his mercy will have been achieved. . . . All the events of redemptive history and their meaning as recorded in the Bible compose a unity in that they conjoin to bring about this goal.⁴

Contained in these sentences were the seeds of my future. The driving passion of my life was rooted here. One of the seeds was in the word "glory"—God's aim in history was to "fully display his glory." Another seed was in the word "delight"—God's aim was that his people "delight in him with all their heart." The passion of my life has been to understand and live and teach and preach how these two aims of God relate to each other—indeed, how they are not two but one.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that if I wanted to come to the end of my life and not say, "I've wasted it!" then I would need to press all the way in, and all the way up, to the ultimate purpose of God and join him in it. If my life was to have a single, all-satisfying, unifying passion, it would have to be God's passion. And, if Daniel Fuller was right, God's passion was the display of his own glory and the delight of my heart.

All of my life since that discovery has been spent experiencing and examining and explaining that truth. It has become clearer and more certain and more demanding with every year. It has become clearer that God being glorified and God being enjoyed are not separate categories. They relate to each other not like fruit and animals, but like fruit and apples. Apples are one kind of fruit. Enjoying God supremely is one way to glorify him. Enjoying God makes him look supremely valuable.

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PREACHER SEALED THE BREAKTHROUGH

Jonathan Edwards came into my life at this time with the most powerful confirmation of this truth I have ever seen outside the Bible. It was powerful because he showed that it was in the Bible. As I write in the year 2003, we are marking his 300th birthday. He was a pastor and theologian in New England. For me he has become the most important dead teacher outside the Bible. No one outside Scripture has shaped my vision of God and the Christian life more than Jonathan Edwards.

I thank God that Edwards did not waste his life. It ended abruptly from a failed smallpox vaccination when he was fifty-four. But he had lived well. His life is inspiring because of his zeal not to waste it, and because of his passion for the supremacy of God. Consider some of the resolutions he wrote in his early twenties to intensify his life for the glory of God.

- Resolution #5: “Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.”
- Resolution #6: “Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.”
- Resolution #17: “Resolved, that I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.”
- Resolution #22: “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.”⁵

This last resolution (#22) may strike us as blatantly self-centered, even dangerous, if we do not understand the deep connection in Edwards’s mind between the glory of God and the happiness of Christians. The violence he had in mind was what Jesus meant when he said in essence, “Better to gouge out your

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eye to kill lust and go to heaven than to make peace with sin and go to hell” (Matthew 5:29). And with regard to seeking his own happiness, keep in mind that Edwards was absolutely convinced that being happy in God was the way we glorify him. This was the reason we were created. Delighting in God was not a mere preference or option in life; it was our joyful duty and should be the single passion of our lives. Therefore to resolve to maximize his happiness in God was to resolve to show him more glorious than all other sources of happiness. Seeking happiness in God and glorifying God were the same.

THE GREAT COMING TOGETHER FOR ME

Here is how Edwards explained it. He preached a sermon when he was still in his early twenties with this main point: “The godly are designed for unknown and inconceivable happiness.” His text was 1 John 3:2, “And it doth not yet appear what we shall be” (KJV).

[The] glory of God [does not] consist merely in the creature’s perceiving his perfections: for the creature may perceive the power and wisdom of God, and yet take no delight in it, but abhor it. Those creatures that so do, don’t glorify God. Nor doth the glory of God consist especially in speaking of his perfections: for words avail not any otherwise than as they express the sentiment of the mind. This glory of God, therefore, [consists] in the creature’s admiring and rejoicing [and] exulting in the manifestation of his beauty and excellency. . . . The essence of glorifying . . . God consists, therefore, in the creature’s rejoicing in God’s manifestations of his beauty, which is the joy and happiness we speak of. So we see it comes to this at last: that the end of the creation is that God may communicate happiness to the creature; for if God created the world that he may be glorified in the creature,

he created it that they might rejoice in his glory: for we have shown that they are the same.⁶

This was the great coming together for me—the breakthrough. What was life about? What was it for? Why do I exist? Why am I here? To be happy? Or to glorify God? Unspoken for years, there was in me the feeling that these two were at odds. Either you glorify God or you pursue happiness. One seemed absolutely right; the other seemed absolutely inevitable. And that is why I was confused and frustrated for so long.

Compounding the problem was that many who seemed to emphasize the glory of God in their thinking did not seem to enjoy him much. And many who seemed to enjoy God most were defective in their thinking about his glory. But now here was the greatest mind of early America, Jonathan Edwards, saying that God's purpose for my life was that I have a passion for God's glory and that I have a passion for my joy in that glory, and that these two are one passion.

When I saw this, I knew, at last, what a wasted life would be and how to avoid it.

God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life. Enjoying and displaying are both crucial. If we try to display the excellence of God without joy in it, we will display a shell of hypocrisy and create scorn or legalism. But if we claim to enjoy his excellence and do not display it for others to see and admire, we deceive ourselves, because the mark of God-enthralled joy is to overflow and expand by extending itself into the hearts of others. The wasted life is the life without a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

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THE CRYSTAL-CLEAR REASON FOR LIVING

The Bible is crystal-clear: God created us for his glory. Thus says the Lord, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom *I created for my glory*” (Isaiah 43:6-7). Life is wasted when we do not live for the glory of God. And I mean *all* of life. It is all for his glory. That is why the Bible gets down into the details of eating and drinking. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). We waste our lives when we do not weave God into our eating and drinking and every other part by enjoying and displaying him.

What does it mean to glorify God? It may get a dangerous twist if we are not careful. *Glorify* is like the word *beautify*. But *beautify* usually means “make something more beautiful than it is,” improve its beauty. That is emphatically *not* what we mean by *glorify* in relation to God. God cannot be made more glorious or more beautiful than he is. He cannot be improved, “nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything” (Acts 17:25). *Glorify* does not mean add more glory to God.

It is more like the word *magnify*. But here too we can go wrong. *Magnify* has two distinct meanings. In relation to God, one is worship and one is wickedness. You can magnify like a telescope or like a microscope. When you magnify like a microscope, you make something tiny look bigger than it is. A dust mite can look like a monster. Pretending to magnify God like that is wickedness. But when you magnify like a telescope, you make something unimaginably great look like what it really is. With the Hubble Space Telescope, pinprick galaxies in the sky are revealed for the billion-star giants that they are. Magnifying God like that is worship.

We waste our lives when we do not pray and think and dream and plan and work toward magnifying God in all spheres of life. God created us for this: to live our lives in a way that

makes him look more like the greatness and the beauty and the infinite worth that he really is. In the night sky of this world God appears to most people, if at all, like a pinprick of light in a heaven of darkness. But he created us and called us to make him look like what he really is. This is what it means to be created in the image of God. We are meant to image forth in the world what he is really like.

DOES BEING LOVED MEAN BEING MADE MUCH OF?

For many people, this is not obviously an act of love. They do not feel loved when they are told that God created them for *his* glory. They feel used. This is understandable given the way love has been almost completely distorted in our world. For most people, to be loved is to be made much of. Almost everything in our Western culture serves this distortion of love. We are taught in a thousand ways that love means increasing someone's self-esteem. Love is helping someone feel good about themselves. Love is giving someone a mirror and helping him like what he sees.

This is not what the Bible means by the love of God. Love is doing what is best for someone. But making self the object of our highest affections is not best for us. It is, in fact, a lethal distraction. We were made to see and savor God—and savoring him, to be supremely satisfied, and thus spread in all the world the worth of his presence. Not to show people the all-satisfying God is not to love them. To make them feel good about themselves when they were made to feel good about seeing God is like taking someone to the Alps and locking them in a room full of mirrors.

PATHOLOGICAL AT THE GRAND CANYON

The really wonderful moments of joy in this world are not the moments of self-satisfaction, but self-forgetfulness. Standing

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on the edge of the Grand Canyon and contemplating your own greatness is pathological. At such moments we are made for a magnificent joy that comes from outside ourselves. And each of these rare and precious moments in life—beside the Canyon, before the Alps, under the stars—is an echo of a far greater excellence, namely, the glory of God. That is why the Bible says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

Sometimes people say that they cannot believe that, if there is a God, he would take interest in such a tiny speck of reality called humanity on Planet Earth. The universe, they say, is so vast, it makes man utterly insignificant. Why would God have bothered to create such a microscopic speck called the earth and humanity and then get involved with us?

Beneath this question is a fundamental failure to see what the universe is about. It is about the greatness of God, not the significance of man. God made man small and the universe big to say something about himself. And he says it for us to learn and enjoy—namely, that he is infinitely great and powerful and wise and beautiful. The more the Hubble Telescope sends back to us about the unfathomable depths of space, the more we should stand in awe of God. The disproportion between us and the universe is a parable about the disproportion between us and God. And it is an understatement. But the point is not to nullify us but to glorify him.

LOVING PEOPLE MEANS POINTING THEM TO THE ALL-SATISFYING GOD

Now back to what it means to be loved. The idea has been almost totally distorted. Love has to do with showing a dying soul the life-giving beauty of the glory of God, especially his grace. Yes, as we will see, we show God's glory in a hundred practical ways that include care about food and clothes and shel-

ter and health. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Every good work should be a revelation of the glory of God. What makes the good deed an act of love is not the raw act, but the passion and the sacrifice to make God himself known as glorious. Not to aim to show God is not to love, because God is what we need most deeply. And to have all else without him is to perish in the end. The Bible says that you can give away all that you have and deliver your body to be burned and have not love (1 Corinthians 13:3). If you don’t point people to God for everlasting joy, you don’t love. You waste your life.

IS ETERNAL LIFE A HEAVEN FULL OF MIRRORS?

Now think what this means for God’s love. How shall God love us? Mere logic could give us the answer: God loves us best by giving us the best to enjoy forever, namely himself, for he is best. But we are not dependent on logic alone. The Bible makes this clear. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God loves us by giving us *eternal life* at the cost of his Son, Jesus Christ. But what is eternal life? Is it eternal self-esteem? Is it a heaven full of mirrors? Or snowboards, or golf links, or black-eyed virgins?

No. Jesus tells us exactly what he meant: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). What is eternal life? It is to know God and his Son, Jesus Christ. No thing can satisfy the soul. The soul was made to stand in awe of a Person—the only person worthy of awe. All heroes are shadows of Christ. We love to admire their excellence. How much more will we be satisfied by the one Person who conceived all excellence and embodies all skill, all talent, all strength and brilliance and savvy and

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goodness. This is what I have been trying to say. God loves us by liberating us from the bondage of self so that we can enjoy knowing and admiring him forever.

Or consider the way the apostle Peter says it. “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*” (1 Peter 3:18). Why did God send Jesus Christ to die for us? “That he might bring us to God”—to himself. God sent Christ to die so that we could come home to the all-satisfying Father. This is love. God’s love for us is God’s doing what he must do, at great cost to himself, so that we might have the pleasure of seeing and savoring him forever. If it is true, as the Psalmist says to God, “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11), then what must love do? It must rescue us from our addiction to self and bring us, changed, into the presence of God.

ARE YOU BEING USED?

So here is the question to test whether you have been sucked into this world’s distortion of love: Would you feel more loved by God if he made much of you, or if he liberated you from the bondage of self-regard, at great cost to himself, so that you enjoy making much of him forever?

Suppose you answer, “I want to be free from self and full of joy in God; I want to enjoy making much of God, not me. And I want the fullness of my joy to last forever.” If you respond this way, then you will also have an answer to the fear I mentioned earlier, that you are just being used by God when he creates you for his glory. Now we see that in creating us for his glory, he is creating us for our highest joy. He is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the most loving act. Anyone else who exalts himself distracts

us from what we need, namely, God. But if God exalts himself, he calls attention to the very thing we need most for our joy. If great paintings could talk, and they saw you walking through the gallery staring at the floor, they would cry out, “Look! Look at me. I am the reason you are here.” And when you look and exult in the beauty of the paintings with those around you, your joy would be full. You would not complain that the paintings should have kept quiet. They rescued you from wasting your visit. In the same way no child complains, “I am being used” when his father delights to make the child happy with his own presence.

FINALLY FREE TO EMBRACE THE SINGLE PASSION FOR WHICH I WAS MADE

With these discoveries I now felt free to affirm God’s purpose for my life revealed in the Bible. I didn’t have to be afraid that I must choose between what is right and what is inevitable—between pursuing his glory and pursuing my joy. I was free to experience the single passion for God’s supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples. I was rescued from the wasted life. Now life could have ultimate meaning—the same meaning God’s life has: enjoying and displaying his greatness.

I was free to embrace the end of my old quest: the Point, the Purpose, the Focus, and the Essence of it all. It was real. It was objective. It was there. And it was rooted in the very essence of what God is in himself. He is glorious, beautiful, and magnificent in his manifold perfections. They are infinite, eternal, and unchanging. They are Truth and Justice and Goodness and Wisdom and Power and Love. Flowing out from what he is in himself comes the purpose for our existence. God’s passion for his own glory gives birth to ours. That is the single, all-embracing, all-transforming reason for being: a passion to

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enjoy and display God's supremacy in all things for the joy of all peoples.

God created us to live with a single passion to joyfully display his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life. The wasted life is the life without this passion. God calls us to pray and think and dream and plan and work not to be made much of, but to make much of him in every part of our lives.

NOW ENTERS THE GLORY OF JESUS CHRIST

Since September 11, 2001, I have seen more clearly than ever how essential it is to exult explicitly in the excellence of Christ crucified for sinners and risen from the dead. Christ must be explicit in all our God-talk. It will not do, in this day of pluralism, to talk about the glory of God in vague ways. God without Christ is no God. And a no-God cannot save or satisfy the soul. Following a no-God—whatever his name or whatever his religion—will be a wasted life. God-in-Christ is the only true God and the only path to joy. Everything I have said so far must now be related to Christ. The old kitchen plaque comes back: “Only what's done for Christ will last.”

To bring us to this highest and most durable of all pleasures, God made his Son, Jesus Christ, a bloody spectacle of blameless suffering and death. This is what it cost to rescue us from a wasted life. The eternal Son of God “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing.” He took “the form of a servant” and was born “in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

ALL THINGS WERE MADE FOR HIM

This Jesus was and is a real historical man in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). Since he is

“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,” as the old Nicene Creed says, and since his death and resurrection are the central act of God in history, it is not surprising to hear the Bible say, “All things were created through him and *for him*” (Colossians 1:16). For *him*! That means for his glory. Which also means that everything we have said so far about God creating us for his glory also means that he created us for the glory of his Son.

In his prayer in John 17 the first thing Jesus asks is, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). Ever since the incarnate, redeeming work of Jesus, God is gladly glorified by sinners only through the glorification of the risen God-Man, Jesus Christ. His bloody death is the blazing center of the glory of God. There is no way to the glory of the Father but through the Son. All the promises of joy in God’s presence, and pleasures at his right hand, come to us only through faith in Jesus Christ.

IF WE REJECT HIM, WE REJECT GOD

Jesus is the litmus test of reality for all persons and all religions. He said it clearly: “The one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). People and religions who reject Christ reject God. Do other religions know the true God? Here is the test: Do they reject Jesus as the only Savior for sinners who was crucified and raised by God from the dead? If they do, they do not know God in a saving way.

That is what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Or when he said, “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:23). Or when he said to the Pharisees, “If God were your Father, you would love me” (John 8:42).

It’s what the apostle John meant when he said, “No one

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who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). Or when he said, “Everyone who . . . does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God” (2 John 9).

There is no point in romanticizing other religions that reject the deity and saving work of Christ. They do not know God. And those who follow them tragically waste their lives.

If we would see and savor the glory of God, we must see and savor Christ. For Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). To put it another way, if we would embrace the glory of God, we must embrace the Gospel of Christ. The reason for this is not only because we are sinners and need a Savior to die for us, but also because this Savior is himself the fullest and most beautiful manifestation of the glory of God. He purchases our undeserved and everlasting pleasure, and he becomes for us our all-deserving, everlasting Treasure.

THE GOSPEL IS THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GLORY OF CHRIST

This is how the Gospel is defined. When we are converted through faith in Christ, what we see with the eyes of our hearts is “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). The Gospel is the good news of all-conquering beauty. Or to say it the way Paul does, it is the good news of “the glory of Christ.” When we embrace Christ, we embrace God. We see and savor God’s glory. There is no savoring of God’s glory if we do not see it in Christ. This is the only window through which a sinner may see the face of God and not be incinerated.

The Bible says that when God illuminates our heart at conversion, he gives “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Either we see the glory of God “in the face of Jesus Christ,” or we don’t see it at

all. And the “face of Jesus Christ” is the beauty of Christ reaching its climax in the cross. The bloody face of Christ crucified (and triumphant!) is the countenance of the glory of God. What was once foolishness to us becomes our wisdom and our power and our boast (1 Corinthians 1:18, 24).

Life is wasted if we do not grasp the glory of the cross, cherish it for the treasure that it is, and cleave to it as the highest price of every pleasure and the deepest comfort in every pain. That is what the next chapter is about.

NOTES

- 1 E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), ix. This quote does not reflect what Hirsch believes but what he is arguing against.
- 2 The quote is from aphorism 125 titled “The Madman,” in *The Joyful Science*, cited in Damon Linker, “Nietzsche’s Truth,” *First Things* 125 (August/September, 2002): 54; available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0208/articles/linker.html>.
- 3 Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 453-454.
- 5 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), xx-xxi.
- 6 Jonathan Edwards, “Nothing Upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 14, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 144.