

SCRIPTURE

Kindling for Christian Hedonism

Christian Hedonism is much aware that every day with Jesus is *not* “sweeter than the day before.” Some days with Jesus our disposition is sour. Some days with Jesus, we are so sad we feel our heart will break open. Some days with Jesus, we are so depressed and discouraged that between the garage and the house we just want to sit down on the grass and cry.

Every day with Jesus is not sweeter than the day before. We know it from experience and we know it from Scripture. For David says in Psalm 19:7, “The law of the LORD is perfect, *reviving* the soul.” If every day with Jesus were sweeter than the day before, if life were a steady ascent with no dips in our affection for God, we wouldn’t need to be *re*-vived.

In another place, David extolls the Lord with similar words: “He leads me beside still waters. He *restores* my soul” (Psalm 23:2–3). This means David must have had bad days.

There were days when his soul needed to be restored. It’s the same phrase used in Psalm 19:7: “The law of the LORD is perfect, *reviving the soul*.” Normal Christian life is a repeated process of restoration and renewal. Our joy is not static. It fluctuates with real life. It is vulnerable to Satan’s attacks.

When Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:24, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy,” we should emphasize it this way: “We *work*

with you for your joy.” The preservation of our joy in God takes *work*. It is a fight. Our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), and he has an insatiable appetite to destroy one thing: the joy of faith. But the Holy Spirit has given us a sword called the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17) for the defense of our joy.

Or, to change the image, when Satan huffs and puffs and tries to blow out the flame of our joy, we have an endless supply of kindling in the Word of God. Even on days when every cinder in our soul feels cold, if we crawl to the Word of God and cry out for ears to hear, the cold ashes will be lifted and the tiny spark of life will be fanned. For “the law of the LORD is perfect, *reviving* the soul.” The Bible is the kindling of Christian Hedonism.

My aim in this chapter is to help you wear the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, and wield it to preserve your joy in God. There are three steps we need to climb together:

First, we need to know why we accept the Bible as the reliable Word of God.

Second, we need to see the benefits and power of Scripture and how it kindles our joy.

Third, we need to hear a practical challenge to renew our daily meditation in the Word of God and to bind that sword so closely around our waist that we are never without it.

HOW TRUSTWORTHY IS THE BIBLE?

Almost everybody in the world would agree that if the one and true God has spoken, then people who ignore His Word can have no lasting happiness. But not everyone really believes that the Bible is the Word of the living God. Nor should someone believe it without sufficient reasons.

Some who read this book will share my persuasion that the Bible is the Word of God. They will want to get on with the use of it. Others will be struggling with whether to give the Bible such a powerful place in their lives. They may want to hear me give a reasonable account of my persuasion. I feel deeply the duty to honor this request for the ground of my confidence in Scripture. So

I have added appendix 2, “Is the Bible a Reliable Guide to Lasting Joy?” I hope it will help some to stand confidently on the Scriptures as the very Word of God.

If our quest for lasting happiness is to succeed, we must seek it in relationship with our Creator. We can do that only by listening to His Word. This we have in the Bible. And the best news of all is that what God has said in His book is the kindling of Christian Hedonism.

THE BENEFITS AND POWER OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

In the Bible are many confirmations that its purpose is to kindle, and not kill, our joy. We find them when we set our sights on the benefits of Scripture, which sustain and deepen our true happiness.

The Bible Is Your Life

Moses says in Deuteronomy 32:46–47, “Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but *your very life*.” The Word of God is not a trifle; it is a matter of life and death. If you treat the Scriptures as a trifle or as empty words, you forfeit life.

Even our physical life depends on God’s Word, because by His Word we were created (Psalm 33:6; Hebrews 11:3) and “He upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Our spiritual life begins by the Word of God: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). “You have been born again...through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

Not only do we *begin* to live by God’s Word, but we also *go on* living by God’s Word: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). Our physical life is created and upheld by the Word of God, and our spiritual life is quickened and sustained by the Word of God.

How many stories could be gathered to bear witness to the life-giving power of the Word of God! Consider the story of “Little Bilney, an early English

Reformer born in 1495. He studied law and was outwardly rigorous in his efforts at religion. But there was no life within. Then he happened to receive a Latin translation of Erasmus's Greek New Testament. Here is what happened:

I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Timothy 1: "It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal." This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that...immediately I...felt a marvelous comfort and quietness, in so much that "my bruised bones leaped for joy." After this, the Scriptures began to be more pleasant to me than the honey or the honeycomb.¹

Indeed, the Bible is "no empty word for you"—it is your life! The foundation of all joy is life. Nothing is more fundamental than sheer existence—our creation and our preservation. All this is owing to the Word of God's power. By that same power, He has spoken in Scripture for the creation and sustenance of our spiritual life. Therefore, the Bible is no empty word, but is your very life—the kindling of your joy!

Faith Comes by Hearing

The Word of God begets and sustains spiritual *life* because it begets and sustains *faith*: "These are written," John says, "so that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by *believing* you may have *life* in his name" (John 20:31). "Faith comes from hearing," writes the apostle Paul, "and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The faith that starts our life in Christ and by which we go on living comes from hearing the Word of God.

1. From a letter cited in Norman Anderson, *God's Word for God's World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981), 25.

And there is no true joy without faith: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace *in believing*” (Romans 15:13). “I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and *joy of faith*” (Philippians 1:25, KJV). How else can we sustain our joy in dark hours except by the promises of God’s Word that He will work it all together for our good (Romans 8:28)?

A great testimony to the power of the Word to beget and sustain faith is found in the story of the conversion and execution of Tokichi Ichii—a man who was hanged for murder in Tokyo in 1918. He had been sent to prison more than twenty times and was known for being as cruel as a tiger. On one occasion, after attacking a prison official, he was gagged and bound, and his body was suspended in such a way that his toes barely reached the ground. But he stubbornly refused to say he was sorry for what he had done.

Just before being sentenced to death, Tokichi was sent a New Testament by two Christian missionaries, Miss West and Miss McDonald. After a visit from Miss West, he began to read the story of Jesus’ trial and execution. His attention was riveted by the sentence “Jesus said, ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” This sentence transformed his life.

I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed.

Tokichi was sentenced to death and accepted it as “the fair, impartial judgment of God.” Now the Word that had brought him to faith also sustained his faith in an amazing way. Near the end, Miss West directed him to the words of 2 Corinthians 6:8–10 concerning the suffering of the righteous. The words moved him very deeply, and he wrote:

“As sorrowing, yet always rejoicing.” People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the

death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God. Day and night...I am talking with Jesus Christ.

“As poor, yet making many rich.” This certainly does not apply to the evil life I led before I repented. But perhaps in the future, someone in the world may hear that the most desperate villain that ever lived repented of his sins and was saved by the power of Christ, and so may come to repent also. Then it may be that though I am poor myself, I shall be able to make many rich.

The Word sustained him to the end, and on the scaffold, with great humility and earnestness, he uttered his last words, “My soul, purified, today returns to the City of God.”²

Faith is born and sustained by the Word of God, and out of faith grows the flower of joy.

God Supplies the Spirit Through the Hearing of Faith

We are commanded to be filled with the Holy Spirit: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). How does the Spirit come? In Galatians 3:2, Paul asks, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” The answer, of course, is “by hearing with faith.” Hearing what? The Word of God!

The Spirit inspired the Word and therefore goes where the Word goes. The more of God’s Word you know and love, the more of God’s Spirit you will experience. Instead of drinking wine, we should drink the Spirit. How? By setting our minds on the things of the Spirit: “Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Romans 8:5).

What are the things of the Spirit? When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit,” he was referring to

2. The story is recounted in *Ibid.*, 38–41.

his own Spirit-inspired teachings (2:13). Therefore, above all, the teachings of Scripture are the “things of the Spirit.” We drink in the Spirit by setting our minds on the things of the Spirit, namely, the Word of God. And the fruit of the Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22).

The Scriptures Give Hope

Sometimes faith and hope are virtual synonyms in Scripture: “Faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for” (Hebrews 11:1). Without this hope for the future, we get discouraged and depressed, and our joy drains away. Hope is absolutely essential to Christian joy: “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces...hope” (Romans 5:3–4).

And how do we maintain hope? The psalmist puts it like this: “He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children...so that they should set their *hope* in God” (Psalm 78:5, 7). In other words, the “testimony” and the “law”—the Word of God—are kindling for the hope of our children.

Paul puts it so plainly: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have *hope*” (Romans 15:4). The whole Bible has this aim and this power: to create hope in the hearts of God’s people. And when hope abounds, the heart is filled with joy.

The Truth Shall Make You Free

Another essential element of joy is freedom. None of us would be happy if we were not free from what we hate and free for what we love. And where do we find true freedom? Psalm 119:45 says, “I shall walk in freedom, for I sought your precepts” (author’s translation). The picture is one of open spaces. The Word frees us from smallness of mind (1 Kings 4:29) and from threatening confinements (Psalm 18:19).

Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you *free*” (John 8:32). The freedom He has in mind is freedom from the slavery of sin (v. 34). Or, to put it positively, it is freedom for holiness. The promises of God’s grace

provide the power that makes the demands of God's holiness an experience of freedom rather than fear. Peter described the freeing power of God's promises like this: "Through [His precious and very great promises] you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Peter 1:4). In other words, when we trust the promises of God, we sever the root of corruption by the power of a superior promise.

Therefore we should pray for each other the way Jesus prays for us in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." There is no abiding joy without holiness, for the Scripture says, "Strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). How important, then, is the truth that sanctifies! How crucial is the Word that breaks the power of counterfeit pleasures! And how vigilant we should be to light our paths and load our hearts with the Word of God! "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (v. 11; cf. v. 9).

The Testimony of the Lord Makes Wise the Simple

Of course, the Bible does not answer every question about life. Not every fork in the road has a biblical arrow. We need wisdom to know the path of lasting joy. But that, too, is a gift of Scripture: "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making *wise* the simple.... The commandment of the LORD is pure, *enlightening the eyes*" (Psalm 19:7–8; cf. 119:18). People whose minds are saturated with God's Word and submissive to His thoughts have a wisdom that in eternity will prove superior to all the secular wisdom in the world: "*Happy* is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding" (Proverbs 3:13, RSV).

Written That You Might Have Assurance

Nevertheless, our perverted will and imperfect perceptions lead us time and again into foolish acts and harmful situations. The day this happens is not sweeter than the day before, and we need restoration and comfort. Where can we turn for comfort? We can follow the psalmist again: "This is my *comfort* in

my affliction that thy *promise* gives me life.... When I think of thy ordinances from of old, I take comfort, O LORD” (Psalm 119:50, 52, RSV).

And when our failures and our afflictions threaten our assurance of faith, where do we turn to rebuild our confidence? John invites us to turn to the Word of God: “I *write* these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may *know* that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). The Bible is written to give us assurance of eternal life.

The Evil One Is Overcome by the Word of God

Satan’s number-one objective is to destroy our joy of faith. We have one offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). But what many Christians fail to realize is that we can’t draw the sword from someone else’s scabbard. If we don’t wear it, we can’t wield it. If the Word of God does not abide in us (John 15:7), we will reach for it in vain when the enemy strikes. But if we do wear it, if it lives within us, what mighty warriors we can be! “I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:14).

This has been the secret of God’s great spiritual warriors. They have saturated themselves with the Word of God. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, sustained himself through incredible hardships by a disciplined meditation on the Bible every day. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor give us a glimpse of this discipline:

It was not easy for Mr. Taylor in his changeful life, to make time for prayer and Bible study, but he knew that it was vital. Well do the writers remember traveling with him month after month in northern China, by cart and wheelbarrow with the poorest of inns at night. Often with only one large room for coolies and travelers alike, they would screen off a corner for their father and another for themselves, with curtains of some sort; and then, after sleep at last had brought a measure of quiet, they would hear a match struck and see the flicker of candlelight which told that Mr. Taylor, however weary, was poring over

the little Bible in two volumes always at hand. From two to four A.M. was the time he usually gave to prayer; the time he could be most sure of being undisturbed to wait upon God.³

The Sword of the Spirit is full of victory. But how few will give themselves to the deep and disciplined exercise of soul to take it up and wield it with joy and power!

An Earnest Exhortation

So the Bible is the Word of God. And the Word of God is no trifle. It is the source of life and faith and power and hope and freedom and wisdom and comfort and assurance and victory over our greatest enemy. Is it any wonder then that those who knew best said, “The precepts of the LORD are right, *rejoicing* the heart” (Psalm 19:8)? “I will *delight* in your statutes; I will not forget your word” (119:16). “Oh how I *love* your law! It is my meditation all the day” (v. 97). “Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the *joy* of my heart” (v. 111). “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a *joy* and the *delight* of my heart, for I am called by your name” (Jeremiah 15:16).

But are we to pursue this joy like Christian Hedonists? Are we to throw the kindling of God’s Word every day on the fire of joy? Indeed, we are! Not only every day, but day and night: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but *his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night*” (Psalm 1:1–2). This delight is the very design of our Lord in speaking to us: “These things I have *spoken* to you, *that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*” (John 15:11). Not to pursue our joy every day in the Word of God is to abandon the revealed will of God. It is sin.

Oh, that we might not treat the Bible as a trifle! If we do, we oppose ourselves and despise the saints who labored and suffered for the Word of God. Think of the courage of Martin Luther as he stood before the secular and eccle-

3. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secret* (Chicago: Moody, n. d., orig. 1932), 235.

siastical rulers of his day, who had the power to banish and even to execute him for his views of the Word of God. The Archbishop of Trier poses Luther the question one last time: “Do you or do you not repudiate yours books and the errors which they contain?”

Luther replies:

Since, then, Your Majesty and Your Lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.⁴

Luther disappeared abruptly after the edict of his condemnation was released. The great artist Albrecht Dürer reflected in his diary:

I know not whether he lives or is murdered, but in any case he has suffered for the Christian truth. If we lose this man, who has written more clearly than any other in centuries, may God grant his spirit to another.... O God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth explain to us the gospel? What might he not have written for us in the next ten or twenty years?⁵

He was not dead. And he did keep writing—for another twenty-five years. And along with many other bold Reformers, he recovered for us the Word of God from the bondage of ecclesiastical tradition. Oh, that we might wield it the way they did! For them it was such a mighty sword against the enemy!

Martin Luther knew as well as any man that *every* day with Jesus is *not*

4. Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Mentor, 1950), 144.

5. *Ibid.*, 149.

sweeter than the day before. And according to his biographer, Roland Bainton, he wrote these famous lines in the year of his deepest depression:

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

TO WIELD IT, WE MUST WEAR IT

But if we intend to wield it, we must wear it. We must be like Ezra: “The good hand of his God was on him. For *Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD*, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:9–10). And we must get a heart like the saint who wrote the great love song to the law in Psalm 119: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (v. 97). Let us labor to memorize the Word of God—for worship and for warfare. If we do not carry it in our heads, we cannot savor it in our hearts or wield it in the Spirit. If you go out without the kindling of Christian Hedonism, the fire of Christian happiness will be quenched before midmorning.

HOW GEORGE MÜLLER STARTED HIS DAY

I close this chapter with a testimony from a great man of prayer and faith. George Müller (1805–1898) is famous for establishing orphanages in England and for joyfully depending on God for all his needs. How did he kindle this joy and faith? In 1841 he made a life-changing discovery. The testimony of this from his autobiography has proved to be of tremendous value in my life, and I pray that it will also bear fruit in yours:

While I was staying at Nailsworth, it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, irrespective of human instrumentality, as far as I know, the benefit of which I have not lost, though now...more than forty years have since passed away.

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.

Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed in the morning. *Now* I saw, that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, whilst meditating, my heart might be brought into experimental, communion with the Lord. I began therefore, to meditate on the New Testament, from the beginning, early in the morning.

The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God; searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word; not for the sake or preaching on what I had meditated upon; but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so

that though I did not, as it were, give myself to *prayer*, but to *meditation*, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer.

When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it; but still continually keeping before me, that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is, that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation, and that my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart. Thus also the Lord is pleased to communicate unto me that which, very soon after, I have found to become food for other believers, though it was not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word that I gave myself to meditation, but for the profit of my own inner man.

The difference between my former practice and my present one is this. Formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer, or almost all the time. At all events I almost invariably began with prayer... But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees, before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, etc.; and often after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then began *really to pray*.

I scarcely ever suffer now in this way. For my heart being nourished by the truth, being brought into experimental fellowship with God, I speak to my Father, and to my Friend (vile though I am, and unworthy of it!) about the things that He has brought before me in His precious Word.

It often now astonished me that I did not sooner see this. In no

book did I ever read about it. No public ministry ever brought the matter before me. No private intercourse with a brother stirred me up to this matter. And yet now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything, that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to *obtain food for his inner man*.

As the outward man is not fit for work for any length of time, except we take food, and as this is one of the first things we do in the morning, so it should be with the inner man. We should take food for that, as every one must allow. Now what is the food for the inner man: not *prayer*, but the *Word of God*: and here again not the simple reading of the Word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts....

I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow-believers to ponder this matter. By the blessing of God I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had from God to pass in peace through deeper trials in various ways than I had ever had before; and after having now above forty years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it. How different when the soul is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what is when, without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials and the temptations of the day come upon one!⁶

6. *Autobiography of George Müller*, comp. Fred Bergen (London: J. Nisbet, 1906), 152–4.

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

JOHN 16:24

*“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Father who is in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

MATTHEW 6:6

*O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

JOSEPH SCRIVEN