

INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST—THE GOSPEL'S GREATEST GIFT, GOD

Today—as in every generation—it is stunning to watch the shift away from God as the all-satisfying gift of God's love. It is stunning how seldom God himself is proclaimed as the greatest gift of the gospel. But the Bible teaches that the best and final gift of God's love is the enjoyment of God's beauty. "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4). The best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). This is the all-encompassing gift of God's love through the gospel—to see and savor the glory of Christ forever.

In place of this, we have turned the love of God and the gospel of Christ into a divine endorsement of our delight in many lesser things, especially the delight in our being made much of. The acid test of biblical God-centeredness—and faithfulness to the gospel—is this: Do you feel more loved because God makes much of you, or because, at the cost of his Son, he enables you to enjoy making much of him forever? Does your happiness hang on seeing the cross of

Christ as a witness to your worth, or as a way to enjoy God's worth forever? Is God's glory in Christ the foundation of your gladness?

From the first sin in the Garden of Eden to the final judgment of the great white throne, human beings will continue to embrace the love of God as the gift of everything but himself. Indeed there are ten thousand gifts that flow from the love of God. The gospel of Christ proclaims the news that he has purchased by his death ten thousand blessings for his bride. But none of these gifts will lead to final joy if they have not first led to God. And not one gospel blessing will be enjoyed by anyone for whom the gospel's greatest gift was not the Lord himself.

IS DIVINE LOVE THE ENDORSEMENT OF SELF-ADMIRATION?

The sad thing is that a radically man-centered view of love permeates our culture and our churches. From the time they can toddle we teach our children that feeling loved means feeling made much of. We have built whole educational philosophies around this view of love—curricula, parenting skills, motivational strategies, therapeutic models, and selling techniques. Most modern people can scarcely imagine an alternative understanding of feeling loved other than feeling made much of. If you don't make much of me you are not loving me.

But when you apply this definition of love to God, it weakens his worth, undermines his goodness, and steals our final satisfaction. If the enjoyment of God himself is not the final and best gift of love, then God is not the greatest treasure, his self-giving is not the highest mercy, the gospel is not the good news that sinners may enjoy their Maker, Christ did not suffer to bring us to God, and our souls must look beyond him for satisfaction.

This distortion of divine love into an endorsement of self-admiration is subtle. It creeps into our most religious acts. We claim to be praising God because of his love for us. But if his love for us is at bottom his making much of us, who is really being praised? We are willing to be God-centered, it seems, as long as God is man-

centered. We are willing to boast in the cross as long as the cross is a witness to our worth. Who then *is* our pride and joy?¹

GREAT SELF OR GREAT SPLENDOR?

Our fatal error is believing that wanting to be happy means wanting to be made much of. It feels so good to be affirmed. But the good feeling is finally rooted in the worth of self, not the worth of God. This path to happiness is an illusion. And there are clues. There are clues in every human heart even before conversion to Christ. One of those clues is that no one goes to the Grand Canyon or to the Alps to increase his self-esteem. That is not what happens in front of massive deeps and majestic heights. But we do go there, and we go for joy. How can that be, if being made much of is the center of our health and happiness? The answer is that it is not the center. In wonderful moments of illumination there is a witness in our hearts: soul-health and great happiness come not from beholding a great self but a great splendor.

THE HIGHEST, BEST, FINAL, DECISIVE GOOD IN THE GOSPEL

The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals what that splendor is. Paul calls it the “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Two verses later he calls it “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

When I say that *God Is the Gospel* I mean that the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment. The saving love of God is God’s commitment to do everything necessary to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying, namely himself. Since we are sinners and have no

¹ I will deal with the question of proper joy in God’s gifts, including people, in Chapter Ten. For now consider, for example, that when Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:19, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” the question still remains: What is the ultimate source or ground or bottom or goal of his joy? There is no dispute that people bring us joy. There is no dispute that our own clear conscience is a source of joy (Rom. 14:22). The question is: How does this joy relate to God? Are these things a cause of joy because they show us more of him or lead us toward him? Or is he a joy because he leads us to them?

right and no desire to be enthralled with God, therefore God's love enacted a plan of redemption to provide that right and that desire. The supreme demonstration of God's love was the sending of his Son to die for our sins and to rise again so that sinners might have the right to approach God and might have the pleasure of his presence forever.

In order for the Christian gospel to be good news it must provide an all-satisfying and eternal gift that undeserving sinners can receive and enjoy. For that to be true, the gift must be three things. First, the gift must be purchased by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Our sins must be covered, and the wrath of God against us must be removed, and Christ's righteousness must be imputed to us. Second, the gift must be free and not earned. There would be no good news if we had to merit the gift of the gospel. Third, the gift must be God himself, above all his other gifts.

It would be a misunderstanding of this book if it were seen as minimizing the battles being fought for a biblical understanding of the *ways and means* God has used in the accomplishment and application of redemption.² The fact that this book is focusing on the infinite value of the ultimate goal of the gospel should increase, rather than decrease, our commitment not to compromise the great gospel means God used to get us there.

The gospel is the good news of our final and full enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Christ. That this enjoyment had to be purchased for sinners at the cost of Christ's life makes his glory shine all the more brightly. And that this enjoyment is a free and unmerited gift makes it shine more brightly still. But the price Jesus paid for the gift and the unmerited freedom of the gift are not the gift. The gift is Christ himself as the glorious image of God—seen and savored with everlasting joy.

² Another way to say this is that *all* of John Murray's classic statement on *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), is crucial, not just the concluding section on "glorification." Our views of the necessity, nature, perfection, and extent of the atonement, and our views of effectual calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and union with Christ are crucial. Nothing I say in this book should be construed to minimize these essential biblical truths. If anything, I hope the preciousness of the goal (seeing and savoring God himself) will make us more vigilant to preserve the truth of the means.

WOULD YOU BE HAPPY IN HEAVEN IF CHRIST WERE NOT THERE?

The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?

And the question for Christian leaders is: Do we preach and teach and lead in such a way that people are prepared to hear that question and answer with a resounding *No*? How do we understand the gospel and the love of God? Have we shifted with the world from God's love as the gift of himself to God's love as the gift of a mirror in which we like what we see? Have we presented the gospel in such a way that the gift of the glory of God in the face of Christ is marginal rather than central and ultimate? If so, I pray that this book might be one way God wakens us to see the supreme value and importance of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." I pray that our ministries would have the same focal point as the ministry of John Owen, the great Puritan writer of the seventeenth century. Richard Daniels said of him:

There is one motif so important to John Owen, so often and so broadly cited by him, that the writer would go so far as to call it the focal point of Owen's theology . . . namely, the doctrine that in the gospel we behold, by the Christ-given Holy Spirit, the glory of God "in the face of Christ" and are thereby changed into his image.³

ARE WE PREPARING PEOPLE FOR HEAVEN?

Can we really say that our people are being prepared for heaven where Christ himself, not his gifts, will be the supreme pleasure? And if our people are unfit for that, will they even go there? Is not

³ Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 92.

the faith that takes us to heaven the foretaste of the feast of Christ? J. C. Ryle once preached a sermon called “Christ Is All” based on Colossians 3:11. In it he said:

But alas, how little fit for heaven are many who talk of ‘going to heaven’ when they die, while they manifestly have no saving faith, and no real acquaintance with Christ. You give Christ no honor here. You have no communion with Him. You do not love Him. Alas! what could you do in heaven? It would be no place for you. Its joys would be no joys for you. Its happiness would be a happiness into which you could not enter. Its employments would be a weariness and burden to your heart. Oh, repent and change before it be too late!⁴

Nothing fits a person to be more useful on earth than to be more ready for heaven. This is true because readiness for heaven means taking pleasure in beholding the Lord Jesus, and beholding the glory of the Lord means being changed into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). Nothing would bless this world more than more people who are more like Christ. For in likeness to Christ the world might see Christ.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST

When we celebrate the gospel of Christ and the love of God, and when we lift up the gift of salvation, let us do it in such a way that people will see through it to God himself. May those who hear the gospel from our lips know that salvation is the blood-bought gift of seeing and savoring the glory of Christ. May they believe and say, “Christ is all!” Or, to use the words of the psalmist, “May those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’” (Ps. 70:4). Not mainly, “Salvation is great,” but “God is great!”

May the church of Jesus Christ say with increasing intensity, “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps. 16:5). “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1). “We would

⁴ J. C. Ryle in a sermon titled “Christ is All,” from Colossians 3:11. *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1877; reprint, Moscow, Ida.: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001), 384.

rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

The world needs nothing more than to see the worth of Christ in the work and words of his God-besotted people. This will come to pass when the church awakens to the truth that the saving love of God is the gift of himself, and that God himself is the gospel.

WHY DO I WANT TO BE FORGIVEN?

Consider an illustration of what I am trying to say. Suppose I get up in the morning and as I am walking to the bathroom I trip over some of my wife's laundry that she left lying on the hall floor. Instead of simply moving the laundry myself and assuming the best in her, I react in a way that is all out of proportion to the situation and say something very harsh to my wife just as she is waking up. She gets up, puts the laundry away, and walks downstairs ahead of me. I can tell by the silence and from my own conscience that our relationship is in serious trouble.

As I go downstairs my conscience is condemning me. Yes, the laundry should not have been there. Yes, I might have broken my neck. But those thoughts are mainly the self-defending flesh talking. The truth is that my words were way out of line. Not only was the emotional harshness out of proportion to the seriousness of the fault, but the Bible tells me to overlook the fault. "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (1 Cor. 6:7).

So as I enter the kitchen there is ice in the air, and her back is blatantly toward me as she works at the kitchen counter. What needs to happen here? The answer is plain: I need to apologize and ask for forgiveness. That would be the right thing to do. But here's the analogy: Why do I want her forgiveness? So that she will make my favorite breakfast? So that my guilt feelings will go away and I will be able to concentrate at work today? So there will be good sex tonight? So the kids won't see us at odds? So that she will finally admit the laundry shouldn't have been there?

It may be that every one of those desires would come true. But they are all defective motives for wanting her forgiveness. What's missing is this: I want to be forgiven so that I will have the sweet fellowship of my wife back. She is the reason I want to be forgiven. I want the relationship restored. Forgiveness is simply a way of getting obstacles out of the way so that we can look at each other again with joy.

WOULD YOU BE HAPPY IN HEAVEN IF GOD
WERE NOT THERE?

My point in this book is that all the saving events and all the saving blessings of the gospel are means of getting obstacles out of the way so that we might know and enjoy God most fully. Propitiation, redemption, forgiveness, imputation, sanctification, liberation, healing, heaven—none of these is good news except for one reason: they bring us to God for our everlasting enjoyment of him. If we believe all these things have happened to us, but do not embrace them for the sake of getting to God, they have not happened to us. Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It's a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the gospel.

WHAT IS THE SUPREME GOOD THAT MAKES THE
GOSPEL GOOD NEWS?

So now we must turn to the biblical basis for this truth. We have seen the broad biblical definition of the gospel, and have focused on the heart of the gospel in justification. Now we must inquire: What is the ultimate good of the gospel? What is its goal? What supreme good makes all the other aspects of the gospel good?

For this we turn first to a great Old Testament declaration of the gospel found in Isaiah 40:9: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news [ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος, LXX]; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news [ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος, LXX]; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, '*Behold your God!*'"

THE GREAT GOSPEL LONGING: SHOW ME YOUR GLORY

The ultimate good made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ, and offered in the gospel, is: "Behold your God!" Moses had pleaded for this gift as he wrestled for God's presence for the jour-