

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO
♦ SATAN ♦



THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO
• SATAN •

EIGHT LIES
ABOUT GOD
THAT SOUND LIKE
THE TRUTH



JARED C. WILSON



NELSON
BOOKS

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*This book is dedicated to the memory
of Richard Shawn Scott II.*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Introduction: The Anatomy of a Lie</i> | xi |
| LIE #1: God Just Wants You to Be Happy | 1 |
| LIE #2: You Only Live Once | 29 |
| LIE #3: You Need to Live Your Truth | 45 |
| LIE #4: Your Feelings Are Reality | 67 |
| LIE #5: Your Life Is What You Make It | 95 |
| LIE #6: You Need to Let Go and Let God | 115 |
| LIE #7: The Cross Is Not About Wrath | 133 |
| LIE #8: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves | 155 |
| | |
| <i>Conclusion: The Autopsy of a Lie</i> | 175 |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 189 |
| <i>About the Author</i> | 191 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 193 |

INTRODUCTION

THE ANATOMY OF A LIE

Did God really say . . . ?

—THE SERPENT

BEFORE THERE WAS DEATH, THERE WAS THE LIE.

It begins as a question, a splinter of inquiry slipping smoothly under the skin of the mind. But it's not a question, really. It is a proposition wearing a mask. The question is a strange, new idea, a smuggled roster of "alternative facts" holding out the prospect of curiosities sated, mysteries solved, even of enlightenments achieved.

The question goes like this: "Did God really say . . . ?"

It does not shock you. It does not immediately jar your religious sensibilities or theological knowledge. It arches an eyebrow, furrows a brow, twists up the corner of a mouth.

"Well, did he?"

Maybe we don't know. Maybe we think we know.

But the question has already begun its work. The splinter has already planted its bacterial doubt. The infection has begun.

Before there was death, there was the lie.

But before the lie, there was the Liar.

We assume he came from heaven, where the lies he told to himself required his expulsion. Having once enjoyed the splendid bliss of dwelling in the midst of the glory and holiness of the triune God, he bristled, begrudged. How it began, we don't know. Perhaps he began to sing the songs too falsely, too inwardly. Perhaps he conspired for what was not his.

In any event, the Liar began as one of God's heavenly host. He was an angel—still is, actually, but then he was a good one. This was before he asked the questions that weren't really questions and before whatever light he carried was hurled from the celestial mountain down to the dust. He was thrown fast as lightning, so terrible was his betrayal of his Creator.

How long he stewed in the filth of his own imbecility and treason, we don't know. Was time then even a thing?

But later it was. God made it. He made all things. And he made all things good.

And there Satan thought he saw his opening again.

He didn't saunter into that garden. He got on his belly and crawled, to feign humility perhaps. In the dawn of precious creation, snakes didn't have the image we have of them today. No, that all started with *him*, with this. Before there was death, there was the lie.

Genesis 3:1 says the serpent was "cunning." He knew he could not bombard his quarry with outright heresy. He couldn't nag or cajole her. He could not appear as his true self, whatever that might look like: the anti-God, antichrist, and anti-Spirit—a soul-sucking void of unrighteousness, stinking of rot and hell.

“Did God really say,” he asked, “‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1).

In the garden, the serpent planted the world’s first seed of doubt.

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.’” (Gen. 3:2–3)

Did she even know what “to die” means? She must have, or the Lord would not have promised it as a consequence. The man and woman both, enjoying the warmth of the gentle sun on their unashamed nakedness, the soft grass under their feet, the joys of unhurried and unbothered work and the sweetness of unhindered marital intimacy, and—best of all—personal communion with their beautiful Creator, would at least have understood that whatever “to die” meant, it was the reversal, the undoing, the erasing of all of that.

The world was full of possibilities. And here was one more: What if God was, in fact, *wrong*?

Was that possible? What if he didn’t actually know what he claimed to know? What if, despite all the available evidence and in opposition to everything she’d ever experienced of his character, *God* was the one lying and not this character hissing seductively in her ear?

“No! You will not die,” the serpent said to the woman. “In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The woman

saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. (Gen. 3:4–6a)

It was that simple and that complex. The prospect of the lie was a full-frontal assault on all of her senses, every point of wondrous contact. Adam and Eve did not lack for food, and yet this fruit looked “good for food,” promising to satisfy in a way yet undiscovered. The world was new and grand, and yet this fruit was “delightful to look at,” dazzling in a tantalizingly different way. Adam and Eve had unfallen minds with an incredibly vast capacity for learning, and yet this fruit “was desirable for obtaining wisdom,” as if it held the key to the one locked door in their imagination, the door into the one room they didn’t even know existed until the serpent shined his light on it.

I wonder what the fruit tasted like. Was it juicy and delicious? Or was it maybe more bitter than they expected, a little thick, like biting into an unripe peach? Maybe at the first bite, they had the first doubt of their choice—“What if this doesn’t do what the serpent said it would?”—but they kept eating, just in case. They’re just like us. Rather, we are just like them.

There is the epicenter of the mess you and I are in today. We create our own craters of dysfunction and disease by our own disobedience, to be sure, but this is the point at which the contagion at work within us entered the world. The Garden of Eden, at the precise moment Adam’s perfect teeth broke the skin of that forbidden fruit, is Ground Zero. “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Gen. 3:7).

The repercussions are swift and vast. God calls them to account. You can hear his footsteps in the garden. They are

perhaps the footsteps of the pre-incarnate, uncreated Christ, seeking out his created siblings for their reckoning. The rest of Genesis 3 shows us that Adam and Eve are brought back out into the light to have their sin accounted for. Their sentence is pronounced, and it includes exile. They are cast out of the garden.

We've been trying to get back in ever since.

But you and I are not as clever as we think we are. We keep reasoning that the way back—the way to peace, fulfillment, wisdom—is the way that got Adam and Eve kicked out in the first place. We can't get in the same way we got out. But we try. And the serpent is still more than happy to oblige with his coaching. He is more cunning than we think he is.

See, the prospect of the fruit promised the three things—fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment—that we have been chasing in every tree ever since. As Frederick Leahy has written, “The presuppositions of modern thought were introduced into Eden by Satan . . .”¹

We live our lives in exile, but we play “garden” every day. We drink the mirage's sand and call it living water. We indulge our flesh and call it glory. We worship ourselves and call it living at the “next level.”

Our hope is as it has always been—knowing God and living in communion with him—but we pretend that the divorce isn't real, that the disconnect is negligible. Or worse: we call the devil's lies the God's-honest truth.

That is what this book is about. Because most people can spot most lies coming. But what is it that made Adam and Eve so vulnerable to the serpent? What did he say, and how did he say it, that made it so compelling and so convincing? He was tempting

them to disobey their Creator, yes, but he didn't just come out and say, "Disobey your Creator."

No, as we've seen, he promises fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment. Similarly, the lies we believe today that erode our dependence on God and discredit our belief in the good news of his Son Jesus are not blatant. They are subtle. They make promises. They seem plausible. In Colossians 2:4, the apostle Paul warns Christians this way: "I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with arguments that sound reasonable."

Paul knew that unreasonable arguments won't hold much sway. It's the arguments that "sound reasonable," that sound truthful, that may in fact have some bit of truth mixed in, that so often keep us preoccupied. We're not looking to reject Jesus and shake our first at God; we're just looking for a little more, a little better, a little greater.

Our enemy has now had centuries of practice at brand marketing. He will not show himself as he truly is. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul is explaining the rot of heresy threatening the integrity of the church, the infiltration of false teachers who sound compelling and winsome and true, and he writes this:

For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no great surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. (vv. 13–15a)

The correlation here between satanic deceit and religious respectability is vitally important, and it's one of the reasons for this book. The devil is good at making sin look good. He knows if

you see the reality of sin—and the reality of himself—you would be less inclined to follow him. Mike McKinley described the enemy's machinations like this:

Think for a second what it would be like if Satan were to tell the truth when he tempted people? Could you picture what that would look like? Imagine if Satan tried to tempt us honestly; it might go something like this:

SATAN: You should cheat on your wife with that good-looking girl in the office.

PERSON: I don't think so. It's wrong and it would hurt my wife.

SATAN: Fair enough; you make a good point. But look, I've run a cost-benefit analysis for you. Here's what I've come up with:

Benefits:

1. A few moments of physical (if perhaps awkward) pleasure.
2. Costs:
3. Disobedience to God
4. Erode your communion with God
5. Ruin, or possibly even end, your marriage
6. Humiliate your wife
7. Mess up your kids' lives
8. Public humiliation and exposure
9. Might cost you your job
10. Might mess up your coworker's life
11. Diseases?
12. Unwanted pregnancy?

13. Dishonor and disgrace on your church

14. Wreck your witness to others

PERSON: Yeah, wow. Umm . . . no, thanks.²

Of course, the first trick the devil tries to pull is getting you to disbelieve in his existence in the first place. But if he can't manage that, he will want you to think you can always see him coming from a mile away. McKinley's humorous illustration shows how silly such a notion would be. No, the best trick of the devil is getting you to think his ideas aren't just yours, but even *God's*.

So he creates his own "gospel," a perversion of the real one. It sounds like good news, because it appears to answer questions we've always had, satisfy desires we've always felt, solve mysteries we've always pondered. If he can give his lies the ring of truth, so much the better.

If I were making a list of benefits like the one Mike McKinley imagines, only this time using the devil's actual logic, it might look more like this:

1. Experience the excitement of new romance.
2. Get the kind of satisfaction my wife isn't willing to give or interested in giving any more.
3. Find someone who listens to me and actually understands.
4. Relieve this stress and boredom.
5. Feel attractive and desired.
6. Feel loved.

Those are the lines we follow when we ponder affairs. We give an inch at a time, compromise after compromise, not in the

explicit interest of disobeying God and dishonoring our marriage vows, but in the interest of fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment. Sin makes an emotional kind of sense to us that defies biblical reason, and the devil is more than happy to help us with that too. After all, God forgives anything, right?

So this is why Satan comes to us as an angel of light, promising illumination and enlightenment. But in the end, he only delivers us into darkness and despair.

It's important, then, to have our eyes open to this deception. How is it that so many modern promises sound true but in the end lead to our deception, or even our destruction? A long, long time ago, the English Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote:

Now the best way to deliver poor souls from being deluded and destroyed by these messengers of Satan is, to discover them in their colours, that so, being known, poor souls may shun them, and fly from them as from hell itself.³

In other words, the best thing to do is to expose the lies, examine how they work, explore why they're so compelling, and explain how to overcome them with the truth. We must "discover them in their colours." In the pages ahead we will look at the following claims, each of which enjoys a degree of popularity today—some even within our own churches—and we're going to see why they're not all they're cracked up to be.

In the first chapter, we'll examine the idea that "God just wants you to be happy." Is this really true? Is this all God wants? What if God isn't as interested in our happiness as he is other things? And what if that's actually good news?

"You only live once." Not just a now-outdated hashtag or

instantly regrettable tattoo, the spirit of this claim is as old as the hills. You may think YOLO is lame, but you are nevertheless tempted to abide by it every single day, so in the second chapter, we'll give some attention to the radical promise (and deficiency) of living life by the mantra of *carpe diem*.

In the third chapter, we will take a look at the subtle Oprahization of the Christian faith. We see it in every self-absolving apology and sheepish declaration of self-empowerment, and we're beginning to see it among professing Christians too. What's wrong with the idea that "you need to live your truth"?

It is similar to the universal lie covered in the fourth chapter: "Your feelings are reality." This is the lie we're afraid is true. This is the lie so many of us don't want to believe in. And yet we do. This is a particularly pernicious deception in the satanic arsenal, and we will go hard at it. This chapter could very well save your life.

The fifth chapter in some ways examines the heart of the original serpentine question. When Satan asked Eve, "Did God really say . . . ?" he was intimating that God is holding out on us. This is our fear. And thus our essential belief whenever we choose sin over obedience is the lie that "your life is what you make it."

In the sixth chapter, we will look at a phrase that has plagued the church in the modern age, one you still find in social media memes and comments, ladled out like chicken soup for the superficial soul. "You need to 'let go and let God.'" There is a kernel of truth in this lie, which is what makes it so easily dispensed and so deceptively destructive. Playing on our religious sensibilities, this lie appeals in a way the others do not.

While the sixth chapter examines a lie that plays on our religious sensibilities, the seventh examines one that plays on our theological sensibilities by way of our emotions. You may not

have heard this lie reach your church quite yet, but it is becoming fashionable in modern evangelicalism, and it's important we confront it head-on ahead of time: "The cross is not about wrath." The arguments seem sound, but the result is an attempt at rescuing God from the Bible. The cross is about more than wrath, of course, but it's not about less. And this is important, especially if you want the kind of relationship with Jesus that *avoids* wrath.

The final lie exposes the mother of all religious clichés: "God helps those who help themselves." That's the common wording, though the message underneath the cliché is more accurately phrased, "God saves those who help themselves." That's not how the devil puts it, but that's what we end up believing—which makes him happy. We close with the confronting of this lie because it will bring us full circle, back to that original garden and then to another garden much later on, where the lie was exposed and ultimately killed.

When we're done exploring the ins and outs of all these temptations and deceptions, we'll take a more open-eyed look at how we get altogether out of the exile that makes these lies so doggone believable. How do we spot them coming? How do we fight the enemy who delivers them? And how do we put a knife in the body of lies for good? In our concluding chapter, we'll perform the Autopsy of the Lie that will prove helpful in our fight to embrace the truth.

For now, however, it's enough to remember the anatomy of the lie: fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment. Who wouldn't want those things?

The answer is, nobody. Which is why we so often find Satan's whispers so sweet.

Well, let me tell you the bitter truth. And the better.

GOD JUST WANTS YOU TO BE HAPPY

*An ever increasing craving for an ever
diminishing pleasure is the formula.*

—C. S. LEWIS, *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*

I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY GOD WOULD MAKE me this way only to tell me I can't be happy."

Gretchen sat stiffly in the chair across from me, hands cradling her iced latte.¹ She didn't look nervous or confused. If anything, she looked *decided*. This was clearly something she had thought about for a long time, and, in a way, she was meeting with me not for counsel or even approval but to make an announcement.

I have been privy to numerous such announcements—most much less decided than Gretchen's, usually more inquisitive, more

searching, more desperate for an answer. And I always wonder, why me?

I assume they come to me because in the minds of some, because of my vocation, I am representative of God. In an odd way, I sometimes think these meetings are requested with me because, as a minister, I very much serve as a stand-in for the God who, in my inquisitors' minds, isn't exactly talking back. They've prayed and agonized and wrestled, and they're not getting an answer—or at least, they're not getting the answer they want. Talking to me becomes a way to flesh out what seems so indecisive in their imagination.

Gretchen said she'd been attracted to girls as long as she could remember. It wasn't anything she sought out. She said she wasn't molested, wasn't exposed to pornography. She'd had loving parents who by all indications had done their best. She wasn't necessarily sexually interested in women, she said, but she was definitely not attracted to men. Her story seems more and more common these days. "When all the girls started getting interested in boys," she said, "I found myself wanting to be more 'one of the boys.' And when all the girls wanted to date boys, I kind of played along, but I never felt anything. Only with girls did I ever feel a spark or want to be held or want to have long conversations. I feel like I could be really happy with one woman forever. This isn't something I chose. I was born this way."

I set that claim aside. As far as I can tell, it's neither here nor there. Some of us are born with certain attractions and some of us have those attractions cultivated in us through circumstances and environments. I'm not an expert on which applies to whom. And from my perspective, it's beside the point.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked her. I ask this of

everyone who tells me what Gretchen was telling me, though not always in the same way. They never say, “Because you represent God,” though as I said, I think that’s a huge part of it. They always say something like this: “Because you seem like someone who would understand.”

I don’t know why I give off this vibe, and to some extent, I’m sort of afraid of it. When I first assumed the pastorate of my previous church, one woman in the town suddenly resumed her church attendance. She was notoriously liberal (and I don’t mean that as an epithet). Eventually, when someone got around to asking her why she was attending church again, she said it was because she assumed the new pastor was “open and affirming,” by which she meant “open to full participation in the life of the church by practicing homosexuals and affirming of their orientation and lifestyle.”

She was wrong, of course, and it didn’t take her long to figure out from my preaching that I was just as “narrow-minded” as the “fundamentalists” who hired me—meaning, we all affirmed the traditional viewpoint of the Bible’s prohibition of homosexuality—but I was curious why she had made this assumption about me. Had I said something that could be misinterpreted?

When I met face-to-face with that woman, she said she had made that assumption first because I was young, and she assumed that young Christians were more progressive than older Christians (which is generally true, actually). But she also assumed it because I talked about grace a lot and had a comforting demeanor in the pulpit. I talked about sin a lot too—you actually can’t talk about grace biblically without talking about sin—but I had talked about a bunch of other sins, mostly found among religious people, before

I had talked about the sin of homosexuality, and in the interim her assumption was born.

Gretchen knew my position on homosexuality. She had heard me teach on the subject before. She had heard me say all the things biblically-shaped preachers ought to say—that homosexuality is a sin that offends the holy God, but that the holy God forgives and saves repentant gay folks just as well as straight, that there is no sin too difficult for him. She'd heard me say that the church had failed young men and women who struggled with same-sex attraction by labeling that sin in particular as somehow worse or more culturally heinous than any others, by failing to be merciful to those who doubt and gentle with those who need restoration. She'd heard me challenge the church to stop treating some people and certain sins as more acceptable than others, more redeemable than others. She'd in fact heard me invite anyone who struggled with same-sex attraction to trust their struggles to Jesus, same as anyone else, to repent and believe and find their peace in him.

She'd heard all of that and more, and she'd found it wanting.

But like that erstwhile churchgoer, Gretchen knew I was a big proponent of grace. And she thought if she couldn't put that to the test with me, she might not be able to put it to the test with anyone.

She had grown up hearing that homosexuality was a sin, and she could see that the Bible seemed to plainly say the same. And yet it didn't seem the same as other sins that appeared to be much more a matter of doing or not doing. Most things the Bible calls sin are matters of choice. You do them or you don't do them. You start doing them or you stop doing them. They didn't appear to her to be matters of the heart.

"I didn't choose this," she said. "It is a part of me. It *is* me."

In her mind, and in the minds of so many others, her sexual orientation was part of her identity, her “wiring.” She hadn’t chosen to be gay, she reasoned, any more than I had chosen to be straight. “Imagine if God forbid you from being straight,” she said.

I thought to myself, *Well, there are certain ways of being “straight” that God does forbid.* But I didn’t say that. Instead, I said, “First, thank you for sharing this with me. It tells me that for some reason you trust me. Second, though, I have to tell you that I don’t think you’re understanding grace in a way that’s exactly biblical.”

I tried to put it as gently and yet as clearly as I could, but it didn’t quite land.

“I figured you’d say that,” she said. “But you don’t really know what this feels like.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t know what this specific thing feels like. But I’m not a stranger to feeling like something is embedded in my bones, that there’s a desire that I wish I could be rid of but for whatever reason God won’t take away, and wondering what in the world I do with how it seems like I was made to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I can’t speak with authenticity to being attracted to the same sex, but I can speak with experience to wondering why God would allow desires in me that he didn’t want me to fulfill. Why would God make me this way only to keep me from being happy? I *do* understand that feeling.”

And chances are, dear reader, you do too. Maybe you don’t struggle with same-sex attraction, or maybe you do, but the idea that there are longings both innate to us and forbidden from us is a spiritual conundrum faced by everyone. Nearly every heterosexual Christian male I know has had to routinely mortify a lust for women that feels natural, instinctual. There are sins like gluttony

and worry that seem to arise from the fabric of our very nature. And they do. Because our fallen nature will always haunt us this side of Christ's return.

But doesn't God want us to be happy?

Well . . . it's complicated. It's actually as complicated as we are.

When the serpent slithered up to Eve in the garden, what he was tempting her with did not fall far outside of her design. Fulfillment. Beauty. Enlightenment. These are all things God had created her to want. Indeed, Adam and Eve had been created with an endless capacity for fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment, provided they were oriented the right direction. Her grasp for them in a way strictly forbidden was the problem, but her capacity for them was part of her design.

Now, before I go too far, I want to reiterate that I do not believe homosexuality is part of God's design for human beings. Like all sexual sin, including sinful desires experienced heterosexually (or solosexually), homosexuality is a consequence of the fall, in essence a departure from God's good design for men and women and their experience of sexuality. And this is true of all sexual sin—that is, the expression of sexuality in ways explicitly forbidden by the Bible. All sexual immorality is a corruption of something good, of even *desires* that are essentially good. These include things like relational intimacy and the experience of true love. We were made to know and be known. We were made to experience love. Therefore, these desires are not sins, even if the ways we feel wired to satisfy them so often are. This isn't a distinctly "gay" phenomenon. This side of the fall, it's just being human.

And this is why I told Gretchen she wasn't seeing the whole picture in relation to grace. Most of the time, we think of sin like

she did—things you do or don't do. And then grace is what lets you off the hook when you get it wrong. But sin is much bigger than that. And so is grace.

Sin in fact is very much about how we're wired. Sinful actions are simply the outward expressions of our sinful nature. This is one reason why Jesus in his famous Sermon on the Mount began reframing the place of sin from outward behavior to inner character. He was not saying that committing physical adultery is no big deal; instead, he was saying that any of us can be just as guilty of sexual sin as the physical adulterer, because the sinful disorder begins in our inner selves. The same goes for his correlation between murder and anger.

Sin isn't purely about the malfunction; it's essentially about the faulty wiring.

In that regard, grace is not simply about pardoning sinful behavior; it's also about rewiring the sinners themselves. The grace the Bible talks about is power not just for justification but also for transformation.

To get a better vision of how big God's grace really is, however, we have to see the lie that leads us astray for what it is. And while "God just wants me to be happy" seems pretty simple and straightforward, it's a compelling lie for a fairly complex reason. It has all the longing of the human soul inside of it. So we are up against the world here. And we have to first be careful in understanding why this claim is not true, and second be careful in the truth we use to counteract it.

There are actually two lies related to God and happiness that operate as a kind of yin and yang in the Christian imagination. We'll take them one at a time.

THE FIRST SIDE OF THE LIE: GOD
JUST WANTS YOU TO BE HAPPY

You don't have to be gay to believe the meeting of your romantic and sexual desires will finally make you happy. I know, because this has been my struggle for most of my life. I remember lying awake at night in my teenage bedroom, staring at the ceiling, fighting tooth and nail against the lust that seemed to come as natural as breathing, and praying to God to give me a girlfriend. If I only had a girl I could love and be loved by, I wouldn't struggle so much with the sin in my mind.

Of course, I was fooling myself. I was imagining that all my misplaced desires were really about romantic love, that if I had someone to love who would love me back, all my angst would go quietly away. When we're spiritually sober, we know it doesn't work that way.

In the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon is an old man looking back on his youth and all the time he wasted trying to please desires that were too big to be contained. He had everything anybody could ever want. He imagined having all the sex he could desire would solve the ache in his heart. Didn't work. He imagined having all the natural beauty his eyes could take in would do the trick. Didn't work. He imagined all the money, all the mansions, all the majesty of power and wisdom would finally calm the storm in his soul. It didn't work.

Why? Because his heart has an eternal gap in it (Eccl. 3:11), and none of those things was eternal.

Incidentally, this is why your dietary "cheat day" or a night out drinking doesn't really relieve the stress built up by the work-week. It's why the porn you looked at last night only left you

feeling ashamed, not satisfied. And it's why even the perfectly adequate spouse you either desire or actually have hasn't totally made you at ease with the problem of you.

I'm in my forties now, safely removed from the teenage years but not from all my teenage dumbness. I still think, *If I only had _____, I'd finally be happy.* What fills in the blank is a little different depending on my season of life or even the circumstances of my day, but I repeat the same error over and over. I think something temporary will solve something eternal.

This is perhaps Satan's greatest hit. If he can get our eyes lowered to ground level in search of fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment, he's already most of the way to getting us to disobey. This is a go-to move for him, because it's already the built-in bent of our hearts. Because of the sin nature we are all born with, our eyes naturally drift downward to ourselves and the things around us. In fact, it takes supernatural help to lift our gaze to behold the ultimate fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment of the glory of Christ. In a strange way, looking to God goes against our grain, so all the devil really needs to do is pet us. We like a good petting.

The search for happiness is probably the most universal experience for all people throughout all time. There is a reason, for instance, the evangelistic tract "The Four Spiritual Laws," famous since 1952, contains the promise "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," instead of "God loves you and has a difficult plan for your life." The difficult part we already know. It's the wonderful part we *want*.

So when we hear the claim "God just wants you to be happy," it feels right.

There is a logic in the claim that God just wants us to be

happy that is hard to dismantle. Like my friend Gretchen said, it's hardly a matter of doing or not doing. It's really a matter of being or not being. And we can trace the logic back up to our conception of God himself.

God made us. And God made us with the capacity for happiness. And he made us with unique interests, specific temperaments, and strong desires. What kind of God would want us to suppress those things? Why would he tease us that way?

God is good, isn't he? So why would a good God want us to be unhappy, living so untrue to ourselves?

If you recall, this is the tack Satan took in the garden with Eve. In so many words, he said, "Look, why would God make you with the capacity for God-ness yourself and then keep you from it? Why not become like him?" In a way, she didn't even know what she was missing until the serpent told her she was missing out.

"You can do this," he implies. "So why wouldn't you?"

It's easy to locate the belief in this lie solely in the world of hedonistic pleasure. Most of us can look at the sex addict, the greedy money-grubber, the power-hungry abuser, or the gluttonous pleasure-hound and easily spot the counterfeit happiness, even when they themselves seem so blind to their own perversions. But it's the ordinary melancholy that gets most of us. You and I aren't perverted pleasure-cruisers. Right?

Well, maybe not. But we're on a parallel track every time we assume that if we're not happy, we are being robbed. Because, just like those gross perverts *out there*, we are bent toward our own happiness as the ultimate goal in life.

The hard truth is, God doesn't just want us to be happy.

GOD'S FIRST PRIORITY IN YOUR LIFE

“Just do good for your own self. Do good because God wants you to be happy.”²

Thus spake Victoria Osteen from the stage of Houston's Lakewood Church in a now-deleted video that made a bit of a viral splash in 2014. Standing next to her husband and co-pastor, Joel, perhaps the world's most renowned proponent of self-help religion, what Mrs. Osteen said had a ring of truth to it. And it sure sounded good. “When we obey God,” she said, “we're not doing it for God. . . . We're doing it for ourselves. Because God takes pleasure when we're happy. That's the thing that gives him the greatest joy.”

It's quite a bold claim. But is it true?

As with most things, context is everything. And in a religious context in which sin is rarely if ever mentioned (much less rebuked), the cross of Christ seems more a bug than a feature. The prevailing message is “live your best life now,” “become a better you,” and “think better, live better,” but the answer is no: God's greatest pleasure isn't our happiness. The Osteens and a handful of other prosperity gospel preachers have made this message their stock and trade. It is self-actualization masquerading as Christianity, and it resembles the spirituality of the New Age more than the spirituality of the Bible.

Why? Because God's priority in the Scriptures does not at all seem to be our happiness—at least, not so far as the Osteens of the world position it, in terms of health, wealth, and personal success.

What, then, is God's main priority for us? I mean, what in the world is he doing with us? You ever wonder that?

Before I answer that question, let me set up my answer with a brief survey of real life. Ready?

You and I come into this world through a very painful process for our mothers. Even if they've had the benefit of an epidural or other pain-relieving methods for childbirth. The time of pregnancy is hard. The giving birth is hard. And then we pop out, usually crying. We're sometimes happy as children but very often not. Then we grow up, and we get better about managing our emotions and rationalizing our unmet expectations—for the most part—but life is still hard. When we're little kids we think being teenagers will be awesome. Then we become teenagers and we wish we were adults. Then we're adults and we realize how much we miss being little kids.

Every stage of life contains tests of all kinds. Every stage of life brings new challenges, fresh hurts, unrealized dreams, and overwhelming fears. Then we get old, and everything starts hurting and falling apart. Then we die. As Job says, "Anyone born of woman is short of days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). In other words, "Life stinks, then you die." (Don't ever let anybody say the Bible doesn't shoot us straight.) You won't ever catch the prosperity gospelist preaching that!

Now, if we're lucky, sometime in the midst of all that trouble we take long walks on the beach, stare at sunrises and sunsets, go to the zoo, watch our kids play in the yard, laugh with friends over a board game or around a campfire, listen to Grandma sing a hymn while she makes cookies, hold hands with our spouse while watching a movie, get hugged and kissed a whole bunch, hear Handel's *Messiah*, see snow falling on a quiet Christmas morning, and experience a million other pleasures besides. We sometimes think those are all the things that make life worth living.

Which is why sometimes we don't think life is worth living. Because we don't get enough, or any, of those things. The pains seem to outnumber the pleasures. Or, even if we don't quite get to that kind of despair, we still from time to time beat against the hurt in our hearts that no earthly pleasure seems to console. We get sick—or worse, a loved one does. We mess up, sometimes in very big ways that hold no promise of being rectified. People insult us, betray us, or just change into other kinds of people we don't want to be friends with. Sometimes that person is our spouse or our child or our parent or our pastor. We lose jobs, we lose health, we lose vision. We go to doctors, to therapists, to life coaches. We go to church.

Sometimes the hurt isn't anything we can put our finger on. It's just there, weighing us down and hanging all around. It's a shadow hanging over us or a darkness buried deep inside of us.

If you believe in the biblical God—which is to say, the one Creator who is sovereign over all—somehow your version of his take on happiness has to accommodate for these realities.

The hurt is one reason why so many people reject the idea of God. They do not see how one who is all-loving and all-controlling could allow such pain and hardship in the world. He's either not all-loving or not all-controlling, they reason. And that makes perfect sense—*if* God's main priority for us is happiness.

When God summoned the apostle Paul into lifetime service in the cause of Christ, he puts it this way to Ananias: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

Later, Paul recounts his missionary adventures like this:

Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.

Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, and dangers among false brothers; toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing. Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24–28)

If this is the biblical reality for those who pursue God like the apostle Paul, what hope do the rest of us “normal” people have?

I mean, if God just wanted us to be happy, he wouldn't have responded to Adam and Eve's rebellion with a curse (Gen. 3:13–19), would he?

So happiness must not be God's main priority for us. If it is, he's not very good at being God. Otherwise, life would simply consist of one pleasure after another.

Now that we've been reminded of reality, we come back to the question: What, then, is God's main priority for us? The answer is all over the Scriptures. A sampling:

- Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.—Genesis 15:6
- Be my holy people.—Exodus 22:31
- For I am the LORD your God, so you must consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy.—Leviticus 11:44
- This way you will remember and obey all my commands and be holy to your God.—Numbers 15:40

- We will be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple.—Psalm 65:4
- There is life in the path of righteousness, and in its path there is no death.—Proverbs 12:28
- I will honor the holiness of my great name. . . . The nations will know that I am the LORD—this is the declaration of the LORD GOD—when I demonstrate my holiness through you in their sight.—Ezekiel 36:23
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.—Matthew 5:6
- But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.—Matthew 6:33
- Since by the one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive the overflow of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.—Romans 5:17
- For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him.—Ephesians 1:4
- Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness.—2 Timothy 2:22
- Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness—without it no one will see the Lord.—Hebrews 12:14
- But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy . . . ; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.”—1 Peter 1:15–16
- “Let the righteous go on in righteousness; let the holy still be holy.”—Revelation 22:11

There are many more examples besides. But the bottom line is this: The through-line of the Scriptures is that God has prioritized his own glory—over and over, we see how everything he says and does is to make his glory known, for his own “namesake”—and this means that his ultimate concern for us is that we be holy.

Now, holiness does not exclude happiness. They are not set against each other, as if to be holy necessitates being unhappy. Nor do we have any biblical basis from which to conclude that God is somehow happy that we are unhappy. I will say more about how happiness and holiness work together in a moment, but for now it is enough to see that *as a matter of priority*, God is much more concerned that we be holy than that we be happy.

Think of the ancient sufferer Job in the Bible. This man lost everything good in his life—his children, his livelihood, his possessions, and even his health. Sitting in a heap of ashes, scraping boils off his skin while his wife nags and his friends accuse and the devil afflicts, Job was most certainly not happy. And the emphasis of the entire book of Job is not that Job should look on the bright side of things. He could see none. The emphasis was not that he should think positively or put on a happy face or fake it till he could make it. No, the emphasis from God’s perspective was that Job should know the glorious grandeur of the holiness of God and that Job himself should be holy too (Job 1:22).

This is important for the person who believes in the God of the Bible, because it means that while happiness may come and go depending on the circumstances of life or the disposition of our own temperament, holiness is always at hand. We can be holy even when we’re not happy, and vice versa.

To be holy is to be “set apart,” to pursue submission to God that reflects his existence and his character and that—this is

important—more reflects the character of who we were created to be, the us that we were before we believed the satanic lie that made us unholy.

This is what makes the half-truth “God just wants you to be happy” so dangerous: the devil would be perfectly satisfied if we were perfectly satisfied apart from the holiness of God. He will do whatever it takes to get us interested ultimately in our own happiness. He doesn’t care how we feel, so long as we’re unrighteous. The devil would love for you to be perfectly happy, so long as you are not holy. He knows happily unholy people rob glory from God and go happily to hell.

So no, Victoria Osteen is not totally right when she says we ought to do good for ourselves instead of for God, because God’s chief concern is not our pleasure but our holiness.

But neither is Osteen totally wrong.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LIE: GOD DOESN’T CARE IF YOU’RE HAPPY

As I said previously, there are actually two lies related to God and happiness that operate as a kind of yin and yang in the Christian imagination. The first is that “God just wants us to be happy.” The problem with that lie is the word *just*. God’s priority is not our happiness but our holiness. And yet, God is not disinterested in our happiness. So the other side of the lie is the opposite extreme: “God doesn’t care if you’re happy.”

Those reacting to that lie were likely the most eager to believe Victoria Osteen’s half-truth. And to be clear, what she said about obeying God not for him but primarily for us—that he’s happy when

we're happy—in context, is dead wrong and spiritually dangerous. She's derailed and in the ditch. But the right track is in eyesight.

Osteen is not *totally* wrong, because walking with God is a—let the reader understand—*happy* thing. It's a different kind of happy, to be sure. But it's a happy thing nonetheless. Not happy-go-lucky. Not happy in moments or gifts. But happy in the Sovereign, in the Giver. The eighteenth-century Anglican preacher George Whitefield explained:

As it is an honorable, so it is a pleasing thing, to walk with God. The wisest of men has told us, that “wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace.” And I remember pious Mr. Henry, when he was about to expire, said to a friend, “You have heard many men’s dying words, and these are mine: A life spent in communion with God, is the pleasantest life in the world.” I am sure I can set to my seal that this is true. Indeed, I have been listed under Jesus’ banner only for a few years; but I have enjoyed more solid pleasure in one moment’s communion with my God, than I should or could have enjoyed in the ways of sin, though I had continued to have gone on in them for thousands of years.³

Whitefield, in his inimitable way, is helping us to remember the biblical truth that holiness and happiness are not opposed to each other but often go hand in hand. In fact, God is not opposed to our happiness; he only wishes that we find our ultimate happiness *in him*.

Reflecting on Mrs. Osteen’s unfortunate mangling of priorities, Ligon Duncan nevertheless reminds us of something historic

Christians, in contrast to many today, have believed about the pursuit of holiness:

[O]ur chief and highest purpose, goal and end in life is God's glory. That is what we live for. Whereas many of our contemporaries think that God is the chief means to our highest end (happiness), [we] do not believe that God is a means to an end, he is The End. He is the reason and aspiration for which we exist. There is no ultimate happiness and satisfaction and fulfillment and joy apart from him.⁴

In a 2015 article on the website For The Church, pastor and professor David Prince mounted a biblical and historic defense of Christian happiness, writing:

Whatever one thinks of this approach in pitting happiness against Christian sanctification, it must be acknowledged that it is a novel perspective among Christians throughout the ages. Most Christian teachers have taught a vital and indivisible relationship between joy and happiness and between holiness and happiness.⁵

Prince went on to quote Christians from the church fathers to John Piper and Randy Alcorn in defense of the inextricable connection between holiness and happiness.

The important thing we have to remember, however, is that our priority must not be a particular feeling but a particular fellowship—a close communion with him that is the wellspring of deep, abiding happiness, the kind that cannot come from any earthly circumstances or temporary pleasures.

I will say more about the connection between our emotions and our relationship with God in our coverage of Lie #4, but for now it is enough to reaffirm that God doesn't just want us to be happy, but neither is he disinterested in our happiness. Discerning the biblical truth between these extremes is a key gambit against the devil's wiles. And this also entails discerning the difference between how we typically think of happiness and how the Bible speaks of happiness.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND JOY

Much has been made of the distinction between "happiness" and "joy," and many find it an arbitrary distinction. David Prince, for instance, wrote:

Perhaps "happiness" is used in ways that are a bit broader than "joy," but the terms are virtually synonymous. Most theological dictionary definitions of "joy" describe it by using the word "happiness."⁶

In the Scriptures, yes, they are typically synonymous. But this is definitely not the case in modern parlance. This is one of the problems with Victoria Osteen's assertion. Context is everything.

In today's manner of speaking, we think of happiness as the pleasurable emotion elicited by people, things, and experiences. When I get a raise, I am happier than when I don't. When my kids make good grades, I am happier than when they don't. When my wife gives me a kiss when I get home from work, I am happier

than when she doesn't. When sad things happen, I am sad. When happy things happen, I am happy. This is what is called being a normal human being, in which I respond accordingly to positive or negative circumstances in my life. This is generally what people mean today when they speak of happiness.

The Bible leaves much room for this human normality—see Ecclesiastes, for instance, where people are encouraged to enjoy the good gifts of earth God bestows on us all (Eccl. 3:13)—but this is not the kind of happiness the Bible *promises* us through our faith in Jesus. No, in fact, to follow Christ is in essence to take up the work of spiritual crucifixion every day (Luke 9:23), often through some very unhappy places. Nowhere are we encouraged to have a martyr's complex or act happy about sad circumstances. But we are commanded to rejoice in all circumstances (Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16). Therefore, joy must be different than (the circumstantial kind of) happiness.

What is joy?

Joy is the music that plays when our hearts are tuned to the frequency of God's glory and our connection to it. Joy is the heart's settled and worshipful contentment in our justification with God. Joy is the conviction that, no matter the sadness of our circumstances or the weakness of our bodies, we are secure in the sovereign God who loves us.

Do you see how joy runs deeper than mere happiness? Happiness is dependent upon our circumstances. Joy is dependent upon our Savior.

This is why, though sad times are promised to believers (John 16:33), we are also promised the gift of joy (John 15:11; Gal. 5:22).

THE KIND OF HAPPINESS JESUS PROMISES

The devil promises joy too. “Eat this fruit,” he urges us in a million different ways every day. He holds out the promise of fulfillment, beauty, enlightenment. All the things that run deeper than fleeting pleasures. But his promise is just as fleeting. He wants us to find in the gifts what can only be found in the Giver.

Satan and his minions cannot create anything good. And many times what they tempt us with is not really something forbidden, but something good that might be had *in a way that is forbidden*. God declares sex a good gift to be enjoyed only between a husband and a wife. But years go by, life grows routine, the sex life gets a little stale or even nonexistent. Why would God want us to miss out on a good thing he made? He created those nerve endings, didn't he? And would he want us to be so miserable? A little peek here at someone else, a little taste there of something else . . . what's the harm?

It's not the sex that's bad. It's the perversion of it.

In his classic fictional work on spiritual warfare, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis imagined a senior demon (Screwtape) corresponding with one of his protégés (his nephew Wormwood) as the latter seeks to tempt and afflict his Christian subject. The book is brilliant for its insights into satanic wiles and applications for the Christian's alertness against them. In one of the letters, Uncle Screwtape coaches his pupil on the perversion of pleasure, reminding him that the sin they hold out is tantalizing in part because it corresponds to something their Enemy (God) has actually made for good:

I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all

our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.⁷

Anyone who has given up a succession of inches along the road to degrading themselves knows the feeling. It's there with porn, it's there with food, it's there with literally any other good gift we abuse in the search of fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment. It takes more and more to achieve the same high. Idolatry is drug abuse.

But when we orient ourselves around the Son, the solar system of our desires and appetites falls into alignment, everything orbiting the center of he who is joy personified.

“Until now you have asked for nothing in my name,” he said to his followers. “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (John 16:24).

You and I live daily within an external—and internal—clash of two worldviews. This is the exact tension within which Jesus himself ministered during his earthly tenure. There is the worldview we might call Materialism, which even Jesus' followers can't seem to keep themselves away from and in which the entire unbelieving world continues to swim. And then there's the worldview of Christianity. So many of the disciples' problems arise from confusing the worldview of Christianity with the worldview of materialism. And so many of our problems arise from also

confusing these worldviews. It's one reason why taking verses such as John 16:23–24 out of context can be so appealing, even though we're not doing it intentionally.

The worldview of materialism thinks along these lines:

1. Mankind's greatest need is to have his desires (or feelings) met.
2. Therefore we need things, experiences, and achievements to meet those desires.
3. And then we will be happy.

It begins with our desires (or appetites). It assumes that having “stuff” will satisfy these desires. And when we have these desires met, we will be happy.

Christianity, on the other hand (as I have said), isn't totally disinterested in our desires or feelings—it definitely speaks to those things—but it starts and goes much deeper than any other worldview can. Christianity teaches along these lines:

1. Mankind's greatest need isn't unmet desires but unrealized glory. Our biggest problem isn't unsatisfied feelings but sin. We are disconnected from God and fall short of his glory because of our disobedience and rebellion against him.
2. Therefore, what we need is not things, experiences, and achievements, but salvation, redemption, forgiveness, righteousness, and rescue—we primarily need the glory of Christ.
3. Once we have Christ (by faith), regardless of our circumstances or feelings (happy or sad), we can have something

that runs much deeper than circumstantial feelings. We can have joy. “Fullness of joy,” in fact.

So materialism offers circumstantial experiences and temporary things to satisfy superficial desires. Christianity offers the glory of Christ to satisfy the eternal void inside of our souls.

The problem with the materialistic worldview is that it doesn't go deep enough. We're all searching for happiness, but Jesus is offering a deep, bottomless, abounding, everlasting well of forever-joy.

Like the disciples, many times we think we're treasuring Jesus but we only see the Jesus we want to see, the Jesus we *want* him to be. He knows that when we face the prospect of immense sadness—as did the disciples in the three days of his crucifixion and burial—we may be undone with confusion and pain.

Jesus knows that his followers have to endure a very difficult life in this expansion of his mission since his ascension. They are threatened, accused, exiled, in some cases tortured, and in many cases executed for their faith.

But he makes them a promise. He makes them a promise that is far greater than earthly rewards and earthly successes.

Truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice. You will become sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain because her time has come. But when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the suffering because of the joy that a person has been born into the world. So you also have sorrow now. But I will see you again. Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy from you. (John 16:20–22)

The pain is a promise. And, reader, *your* pain is a promise.

One day your tears not only will be wiped away but will turn to rapturous joy. He will trade your ashes for beauty. Every single hurt you endure will be stored up and returned to you a million-fold in heavenly bliss.

With that in mind, let us turn to the little theology of prayer Jesus offered there in John 16:

In that day you will not ask me anything. Truly I tell you, anything you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. (vv. 23–24)

Whenever we pray—or whenever we expect something from God—we face the clash of worldviews. Will we walk by sight—materialism? Or will we walk by faith—true Christianity? The key phrase in this passage is the repeated “in my name.” It is directly connected to God’s ultimate priority for us, which is holiness reflective of his ultimate priority for himself, which is glory.

Sometimes people treat this prayer like magic words. “The reason you still suffer is because you don’t have enough faith,” they say. Or, “The reason you haven’t gotten what you want is because you’re not praying hard enough.” But this is satanic. We cannot add “in Jesus’ name” and get what we want. God is not some kind of cosmic vending machine for our hopes and dreams. The whole point of John 16:23–24 is that our hopes and dreams are not the point. The point is the glory of Jesus Christ!

When you ask anything “in the name of Jesus,” what that really means is that you want the name of Jesus to be magnified more than anything. And if that means the Father must say no

to your requests—for healing, for comfort, for “stuff,” for *happiness*—it means the no is better than the yes, if only the name of Christ is exalted.

Whatever you want, Lord, we want! Whatever most brings you glory, Jesus, that’s what we want.

The promise is that if you will align your purposes and ambitions and prayer requests with God’s purposes, you still may fail but he never will. And in the end, your sorrow will turn into joy.

I told you in a footnote that the story of Gretchen was a composite of numerous similar conversations I’ve had with same-sex attracted friends. Some of those Gretchens found my answers wanting. Most of them admitted to wanting to believe the Bible. Some of them disagreed with me on what the Bible says about homosexuality. Some agreed with me that the Bible forbids any acting on homosexual desires, but they decided they didn’t care. They wanted to appreciate God’s Word, not obey it!

Yet still others have forged the way, with God’s help, toward difficult belief. They have embraced the hardship of dying to themselves and taking up their crosses daily.

A couple of Gretchens I know are living quite fulfilling lives, subjecting their desires to God’s Word and following his design for men and women. I sometimes wonder why heterosexual Christians think that doing this should be so easy. It may be because they are not quite doing it themselves.

To find your life, you must lose it. Jesus said so (Matt. 10:39). He wants you to have the eternal joy of himself, not simply the fleeting happiness of your flesh.

So many of us have our hearts set on temporary happiness. And that’s fine as far as that goes. You’d be weird if you only wanted to be sad all the time. You’d be abnormal if you enjoyed getting

hurt! So pray for healing, pray for comfort, pray for things you need. But remember that true joy—which you can have despite your hurt, despite your trials, despite your poverty, despite your lack—can be had in any circumstance because you have Christ, who will never leave you nor forsake you. He will never let you go.

This is the only safe “bet,” and it is infinitely more pleasurable than whatever the devil is offering. God doesn’t “just” want you to be happy; he wants you to be holy as he is holy and to find true, lasting joy in him.

YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

You will not die.

—THE SERPENT

I WAS A PRETTY SMART HIGH SCHOOL KID AND FAIRLY well-behaved, too, but occasionally I engaged in some of the stupidest things ever done by stupid people. Such things usually involved buddies, not one of whom was as stupid as the collective group of us. As Tommy Lee Jones says in the movie *Men in Black*, “A *person* is smart. *People* are dumb.” There was no one among us to say, “Hey, this is really stupid.”

How stupid were we?

On a handful of nights over our senior year, we would pile into Mike’s car and drive around the suburban neighborhoods of northwest Houston with Nicky in the trunk. I would sit in the passenger seat while Mike drove, a baseball bat in my lap. We would amble through a vast array of well-manicured lawns

and brick mailboxes until some poor soul ended up behind us, at which point we would wait until we came to a stop sign.

At the stop sign, the car behind us simply waiting its turn, I would reach into the glove compartment and pop the trunk. Nicky would “escape.”

If you can picture the strange sight of someone emerging from the trunk of a vehicle in front of you at a stop sign, imagine also the stranger sight of the passenger of that vehicle—this would be me—jumping out of the car, bat in hand, to “recapture” the escapee. After a few half-convincing blows to the stomach and back with the bat, I would rustle Nicky back into the trunk, slam it shut, and jump back into the passenger seat, and then we would race off.

I told you it was stupid.

We did this maybe five or six times, and at no point did it occur to any of us that it was stupid—only that it was freaking hilarious.

To the people behind us? Not so much.

We had people lay on their horns, people scream, people shout. One guy even began chasing us through the neighborhood. (Nicky was lucky to have that guy so concerned about him.) We eventually stopped but only because the person who chased us happened to be an off-duty police officer. He didn’t catch us, but he did catch Mike’s license plate number. Fortunately, this officer knew it was a stupid prank and that he wasn’t witnessing an almost-botched kidnapping. So he merely gave Mike a call and told him officially, on behalf of the Harris County Sheriff’s Department, that we were stupid and should knock it off before someone got hurt.

This was the early 1990s, before everyone had mobile phones

to call the police or, I guess, upload our shenanigans to Instagram. But this was Texas. Meaning nobody had phones, but plenty of people had guns. I suppose it was only God's kind favor that I hadn't ended bringing a Louisville Slugger to a gunfight.

If you're a young person reading this, thinking it sounds very funny—well, you're right. It is pretty funny. But it was also dangerous and, as I said, supremely *stupid*. But, hey, you're only young once. Do you really want to go through your whole life without doing a few stupid things once in a while?

If not, you should.

This is kind of the point of the entire biblical book of Proverbs. Most of Proverbs is written from the perspective of a dad, presumably with his arm around his son's shoulder, showing his son how not to be stupid. "Son, watch out for the trapdoor of lust. And also for your idiot buddies." That's the basic gist of Proverbs, and it's a common theme through all of the "wisdom literature" of the Bible, so called because it is mostly written in song and verse and reflects a more philosophical style than the prophetic or narrative books. God is very determined that we navigate our lives *wisely*. As opposed to stupidly.

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction,
and don't reject your mother's teaching,
for they will be a garland of favor on your head
and pendants around your neck. (Prov. 1:8–9)

As far as bodily accouterments go, a garland and a pendant are perhaps not as cutting edge as a YOLO tattoo, but what they make up for in timelessness they lack in stupidity.

You don't hear the YOLO ("you only live once") cheer too

much anymore. Like every other bit of hashtag wisdom, its hallowed place in pop culture lasted about as long as a fart. In just a few brief moments YOLO went from hip-hop's version of *carpe diem* to just one more social media in-joke, the subject of countless ironic status updates and sarcastic memes.

In the 1989 Peter Weir film *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams plays an eccentric and inspiring teacher of English lit, who famously tells his students at the traditional boarding school, "Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary." This was perhaps the first popularization of YOLO in our modern era. Williams's Professor Keating was inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman and Robert Herrick, as well as the beauty of nature itself. Three decades on, however, adherents to the assertion that "you only live once" seem more inspired by sex, money, and materialism.

The rappers didn't invent this, though. The devil did.

STUPID IS AS STUPID DOESN'T

It was not a conscious apprehension of our youthfulness that drove Mike, Nicky, and me to carry out that silly playacting in front of hapless motorists in Houston, but it was definitely, if maybe only subconsciously, an embrace of our youthfulness: an implicit acknowledgment that throughout the history of time, young men with lots of energy have done crazy things, and "Hey! *We* were young men with lots of energy." We weren't thinking about the possible ramifications; we were just enjoying being teenage boys doing what teenage boys do. What we weren't doing was thinking at all. We were simply seizing the day.

That central conceit of *Dead Poets Society*—*carpe diem* ("seize

the day”)—comes from the Herrick poem “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” which reads in part:

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today
 Tomorrow will be dying.

In other words, life is short, and it will soon be over. Pick that flower while it’s blooming. It will be too late when it’s dead. Make the most of your time, and enjoy it while you have it.

You could contrast this verse with any selection of lyrics from the Drake song “The Motto,” almost no complete thought from which could I in good conscience reprint here. My kids may be reading this. If you have a high tolerance for explicit language and graphic sexuality, you could Google the song. (Please don’t say I didn’t warn you.) Or perhaps you’ve already heard it. We all do dumb things now and again, so don’t be too embarrassed. In any event, our modern poet Drake waxes poetic around the YOLO theme (the song’s titular “motto”) in talking about clubbing, having sex with anonymous women, making millions of dollars, and having more sex with anonymous women.

He’s a very original guy, this Drake.

No, not really. We can trace all of this—seizing the day, gathering the rosebuds, having as much indiscriminate sex as possible—right to sentiments documented in the Bible. Isaiah 22:13 comes to mind: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”

I mean, what’s the point of life if not to enjoy yourself while you can? This seems to be the working thesis behind the thoughts examined in Ecclesiastes 8:14–15:

There is a futility that is done on the earth: there are righteous people who get what the actions of the wicked deserve, and there are wicked people who get what the actions of the righteous deserve. I say that this too is futile. So I commended enjoyment because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat, drink, and enjoy himself, for this will accompany him in his labor during the days of his life that God gives him under the sun.

The consideration of futility is important there. Doing good hardly seems to get rewarded. Doing bad hardly seems to matter. So why not just do what you want with the time you've got? Why not simply do what you feel?

One of the great things about all the wisdom books in the Bible is that they accurately depict the way our minds work. We really do think this way. We may not live like that as a normal course of life, but from time to time we justify little rebellions here and there, excuse this or that disobedience. Who will notice? What difference does it make?

And the other great thing about all the wisdom books is that they show us how stupid it is to think this way, how thinking this way isn't really thinking at all. The logic of "Eat and drink, for tomorrow you die" doesn't take in all the facts. It is operating at the level of appetite only and not on the level of wisdom.

Wisdom weighs all the facts, not just the convenient ones.

In Genesis 3, the woman says to the serpent that if she eats the forbidden fruit, the Lord says she will die.

"No, you won't," the serpent replies.

The only thing more stupid than not thinking beyond death is not thinking about death at all.

“This is next-level stuff,” he promises her.

And the woman, knowing what God has said, conveniently ignores the facts he’s given her, seeing only the allure of the prospect before her. “Let me eat and be merry,” she appears to think, “for even if I die, it won’t be till tomorrow.”

Sin is fundamentally stupid. Oh, it has that logic of immediacy to it, the appealing apparent sensibility of pleasure—of fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment—but it always bids us make the most of time by wasting it. The temptations you and I face every day carry the same convoluted logic:

- “You deserve this.”
- “They deserve you doing this to them.”
- “It’s just a little taste, a little peek, a little pleasure.”
- “Nobody will get hurt.”
- “This will give you relief.”
- “This will make you happy.”
- “Look, you only live once.”

And then we choose bit by bit a piece of death, believing it will give us life. “You won’t die,” the sin promises. But then you do. We all do.

The convoluted logic of sin is that it makes the indulgence seem urgent, pressing, as not indulging would be to miss out, to store up regret for later, all the while trying to convince us that later will never come. “You only live once” is profoundly stupid in that the risks it gives rise to imply you will live forever.

This is also why I’ve never understood the concept of the bucket list. People fill their list with things like bungee jumping, sky diving, free climbing Yosemite, and I think to myself, *You*

know, for someone trying to get things done before you die, it sure sounds like you've got a death wish.

It is wisdom to make the most of the time that is given to us, yes. But it is wisdom to know that the time given to us is a lot longer than we think it is. The stupid think that you only live once. The wise know that we only get one life, and what we do with it matters because of what comes after.

Seize the day, yes, but seize it in light of what comes when you run out of days to seize.

ONLY GOD CAN JUDGE YOU, AND HE WILL

YOLO has a couple of stupid buddies. One of them is “no regrets.” I especially find it emotionally delicious when this is expressed in a misspelled tattoo, “No Regerts” being a personal favorite. The idea behind “no regrets” is similar to “you only live once,” predicated as they both are in self-centered, self-willed hedonistic indulgence.

I understand that many people who say “no regrets” are thinking of how to make the best use of their days in terms of spending quality time with family and doing good in the world, but far too often, it becomes a stand-in for “eat, drink, and be merry.” In any event, it is impossible for those of soft conscience to truly live a life free of regrets. No wise person could ever live with no regrets. Having regrets is for those who learn from their mistakes and grieve their sins. “No regrets” is for people with no conscience. Only sociopaths have no regrets.

The other stupid buddy is “only God can judge me.” I’ve seen this one on car window decals, in Facebook graphics and Instagram captions, and even on airbrushed T-shirts. (I don’t

know about God, but I definitely judge that last one.) What always strikes me as funny is that those who say “only God can judge me” are usually the kind of people living as if he won’t.

You put these three idiots—“You only live once,” “no regrets,” and “only God can judge me”—in a car together on a Friday night, and they’re going to cook up some seriously stupid ideas.

“It is appointed for people to die once,” Hebrews 9:27 says, “and after this, judgment.” So sure, live up this one life you’ve got. Just remember that the whole thing is spent with time that is borrowed. Back in Ecclesiastes, the guy with the YOLO tattoo gets a strong dose of reality:

Rejoice, young person, while you are young,
and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth.
And walk in the ways of your heart
and in the desire of your eyes;
but know that for all of these things God will bring you to
judgment. (11:9)

What Satan would love for you to do is spend this life as if that’s all there is. First, he won’t want you to think about death at all, not even if it brings you a sense of dread. The devil likes to traffic in fear, but it’s not his immediate go-to, because he knows that fearful people often cry out for help, which means fearful people are very close to having their ears open to divine rescue. Instead, he wants you to think of death as some far-off thing, not a big deal, certainly nothing that could happen tomorrow or in the next five minutes. He wants you drunk on a sense of immortality. This comes somewhat naturally to teenagers, boys especially, but it persists in a kind of perpetual teenagerdom in Western culture

where youth is idolized and immortality is sold in little packets by pyramid-scheming soccer moms and discounted by “lifestyle gyms” every New Year’s.

“You only live once, and it might as well be forever.” That’s the first lie the devil tries.

If that doesn’t work—if you insist on acknowledging your own mortality and finitude—he will say, “Okay, okay, yes, you’re going to die. And yes, it may in fact be tomorrow. So get as much pleasure as you can! Gather up those rosebuds, even the ones in somebody else’s yard, even the ones you’re explicitly told not to pick. You’ve only got one life, and it’s way too short to play by the rules.” If you won’t deny you’ll live forever, he will want you focused as much on the here and now as possible, as if death is a great nothingness that threatens to ruin the party.

What the devil absolutely *doesn’t* want is for you to consider what comes after death. “You only live once,” he insists, not simply as a seize-the-day motivational proverb but as a theological dogmatism. He wants you to stop before you get to the last line of Ecclesiastes 11:9 when “for all of these things God will bring you to judgment.”

You may think I’m overselling this. But “you only live once” isn’t only the motto of adolescent knuckleheads and adult thrill seekers. It’s the motto of every man whose investment in the future is limited to his retirement plan and the material benefits he leaves his family. It’s the motto of every mom whose chief concern for her children is that they end up healthy, in a good school or with a respectable spouse. It’s the motto of every person who goes through life never thinking of what comes after their last breath.

“You only live once” is the subconscious affirmation of every

person, like you or me, who spends their day overwhelmingly anxious about the troubles of the day, as if *this is it*.

Life is precious, and each human soul is sacred. Which is why “you only live once” is too cheap a philosophy for us to buy into.

Jesus himself said, “Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

What he means is, dying isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you. Dying *after you die* is the worst thing that can happen to you. The second death is far worse—infinately worse—than the first. Satan will do whatever is in his power to keep you from thinking about that.

What we do in this life matters far beyond a series of accumulations or our senses of pleasure. It’s not that doing enough good deeds will help you avoid hell. That’s another false gospel the devil likes to preach. And there are plenty of people who do good deeds only to prop up the idol of themselves. This is as much a storing up of wrath for eternity as a life of outward sin.

We are all going to die. Nobody gets out of this world alive. You may die with six-pack abs and a marathoner’s endurance, but you will be worm food. And then you will kneel before a holy God who rises to judge what’s become of your life. Did you waste it focusing only on yourself, giving no thought to this moment?

He will look at your good and bad, but there will be no scales. If you live like “only God can judge me,” don’t be surprised when he does. If you spend your life fixated on your life and not trusting in the one who *is* Life (John 14:6), you will surely die.

The reality is that the eternal life we receive through faith in Jesus is exactly that—eternal. This means that we can live lives today with the quality of eternity, if only because the God of

the universe has incarnated himself in this world and, after his ascension to heaven, sent his Spirit to fill the “eternity in [our] hearts” (Eccl. 3:11).

The devil doesn’t even care if you’re religious, so long as you don’t believe that; therefore, we must reject his false gospel of this-life-onlyism. We must not think only of seizing the day but, in the day to day, taking hold of eternity.

SEIZE ETERNITY TO SPITE THE DEVIL

A couple of years ago I read Matthew McCullough’s book *Remember Death*, but I almost stopped in the Introduction when I read these lines:

In our time and place, death isn’t something we think about very often, if at all. . . . I’m writing to convince those living like immortals that they’re not actually immortal. . . . I’m writing to those for whom death feels remote and unreal—something that happens to other people.¹

Why did I almost stop reading? Because this does not describe me. I think about death every day. In the ministry of my most recent pastorate, I helped bury saint after saint, friend after friend. I preached at countless funerals. I held the hands of one friend after another as they took their last breaths. Death was thrust upon me.

And I think about my death every day. I don’t know if it’s because of the heaviness of my ministry experience, the heaviness of my own melancholy personality, or simply the heaviness

of entering my middle-age years, but not a day goes by that I don't think about when I'll go, how I'll go, and where I'll go.

McCullough was explicitly saying he had not written his book for someone like me. But I read on. Why? Because I don't need to simply remember death but to remember my life. I kept reading because I am always keen on reliable guides to the horizon of eternity. I am glad I kept reading, because I encountered valuable truths like this:

Glory [is not] transient but eternal. Not vaporous but weighty. Not fragmented and fleeting, but joy fulfilled and forever. Because whatever glory may be like, it is defined by the presence of God himself, apart from whom there is no good thing.²

Ah, but we're afraid there are no good things to come! Or at least no good things comparable to the good things to be had in this world. But the exact opposite is true. The good pleasures of this world are only signposts to the greater bliss of heaven. They cannot really compare to them, and therefore they must never replace them. I don't care how tasty Jacob's red stew was; it still wasn't worth the birthright! As John Piper said, "Life is too short, too precious, too painful to waste on worldly bubbles that burst. Heaven is too great, hell is too horrible, eternity is too long that we should putter around on the porch of eternity."³

All of that endless accumulation? All that self-determinism? All that YOLO, "no regrets," "only God can judge me" self-revering gobbledygook? It's just a puttering around on the porch. To borrow from C. S. Lewis, it's a messing around with mud puddles, ignorant of the beach just around the corner.

The devil wants you on the porch. His "gospel" will point out

all the fine architectural features, all the room to play. “Just pay no attention to what’s beyond the door behind you.”

We must spite him, you and I. We must remember the judgment that’s coming, the judgment that matters. We must remember death, yes, but also what comes after.

I wish I could get in a time machine and go back to one night in 1993, stop myself before I got into Mike’s car, and give myself a copy of McCullough’s *Remember Death*. Or just point myself to Ecclesiastes. “You’re not going to live forever, pal. Make good choices. Don’t be stupid.”

I probably wouldn’t have listened. One reason stupid people are stupid is because they mostly listen to stupid messages.

So, by all means, seize the day if you’re just interested in having a little fun. Seize eternity if you’re interested in living forever. There’s a motto for that too.

LIVE ONCE, DIE TWICE; LIVE
TWICE, DIE ONCE

A religious expert once came to Jesus to ask about the kingdom of God. The religious experts had a huge stake in the answers to the “kingdom of God” questions. They had carved out a niche with rules and regulations related to how you could bring, enter, and remain in the kingdom. A lot had to do with what you did.

Jesus said to the man, “Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). It was a weird thing to say, and even the religious expert could not make heads or tails of it. He wanted to know how a grown man could go back into his mother’s womb and be reborn.

You can be very religious and still fall for the devil's lie that this life is all that matters.

Jesus is of course referring to the second birth, the new birth in him—or put another way, the “living twice”—that happens when we repent of our sin and believe in the good news of his sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection. This new birth requires a death of our old self and all its old ways of seeking fulfillment, beauty, and enlightenment anywhere but in Jesus. This new birth requires that we “die to ourselves” and thereby find new life in him (Rom. 6:8; Gal. 2:20; 2 Tim. 2:11).

Live once, die twice. Live twice, die once. No, it's not as catchy as YOLO. I'm not even sure how you'd pronounce it. (Lod-tell-tee-doo?) But as far as clichés go, “live once, die twice; live twice, die once” is a whole lot more biblical than the alternative.

To reject Jesus is to reject real life, as he himself is life. To choose to “do life” without him is to choose a death worse than death: to choose the second death, the spiritual death that comes after physical death. And the spiritual death is far worse. But to choose Christ this side of death is to have him forever. You may die physically, but those who live in Christ live forever. They have “eternal life” (John 3:16).

Ergo: Live once, die twice. Live twice, die once.

Like we do, Jesus' closest followers often struggled with these concepts. Like the religious experts, they had grown accustomed to thinking of the kingdom as pertaining mostly to the here and now. This gave rise to both zealous revolutionaries and compromising sellouts. All along the journey of Christ's ministry, his friends at various moments expected Jesus would begin violently overthrowing the oppressors and “setting up shop” in Jerusalem.

This even appears to be part of the devil's temptations against him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:6–9).

So all along the way, Jesus is constantly rebuking the this-world focus of his disciples. Sometimes he does it gently, and sometimes he does it harshly. But he always does it lovingly, because, unlike Satan, he actually loves these people. He wants what is best for them. In Mark 8:36, he said to them, “For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life?”

The enemy wants us to answer “everything.”

But Jesus wants what is best for you. He knows living like you only live once is to ensure you will die after you die.

You must be born again. Because if you live once, you will die twice. But if you live twice, you will die once. And after that, everlasting glory.

The fruit of the now looks pretty pathetic in the light of eternal life.

Dying twice is the only way to live forever. The devil wants us to believe we won't die. Barring that, he wants us to believe only this life counts, that *this* is all there is. But he's a liar. He wants us to waste this life, because he wants us to waste what comes after. As C. S. Lewis wrote in his mythic retelling *Till We Have Faces*, “Die before you die. There is no chance after.”⁴

After we die it will be too late to change our minds. It will be too late to get our act together. This is why Solomon told those who are young to remember their Creator now, in the days of their youth (Eccl. 12:1). There is no moment to delay. Gather the rosebuds of eternity while ye may! If you have not done so already, seize eternity this very second.