Experiencing the Life-Changing Power of God's Unchanging Affection

STEADFAST

The

L O V E

of the

LORD

SAM STORMS FOREWORD BY DANE ORTLUND

"Sam Storms has blessed me so many times through his life and ministry, but the honesty and hope of this book moved me in a special way. We all need help to keep going when life brings suffering, and Sam teaches us how: look to the steadfast love of the Lord. Sam shows us how to take refuge in God's love even when we cannot understand his ways (which will surely happen to us all). This richly biblical series of meditations will be edifying to everyone who reads it and will bring special comfort and strength to those who are struggling with doubts or spiritual dryness."

Gavin Ortlund, President, Truth Unites; Theologian-in-Residence, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

"When the Creator of the universal calls himself 'I AM,' he reminds us that he is in control, through the good times and the bad. Those words also remind us that God loves us—unconditionally, passionately, consistently. He loves us when a child dies, when a cancer diagnosis is made, when a marriage crumbles, and when death arrives. We may not know why we experience these trials, but we can know with absolute assurance that God's love for us is steadfast, never changing, always present. Drink in the pages of this book and let Sam Storms remind you that God is love—and that he will always love you."

Janet Parshall, nationally syndicated talk show host

"This new book by veteran Bible teacher Sam Storms is a spiritually refreshing, joy-inspiring, pastorally wise study of one of the most important concepts in the Bible: God's steadfast love. Readers of this book will find themselves overwhelmed by a deeper, fuller awareness of God's loving presence."

Wayne Grudem, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

"For years, long after earning a PhD in theology, my greatest theological struggle has been an almost subconscious doubt of God's love for me. I knew this truth in my head, of course, but struggled to grasp the reality with my heart. I am thankful for Storms's scripturally faithful and pastorally insightful treatment of this incredible subject. I only wish I'd read it sooner! Someone once said that the gospel is like a well: the best water is found by going deeper. We simply cannot steep ourselves in the gospel of God's love enough. Enjoy this book."

J. D. Greear, author, Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary and 12 Truths and a Lie: Answers to Life's Biggest Questions

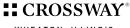
The Steadfast Love of the Lord

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Experiencing the Life-Changing Power of God's Unchanging Affection

Sam Storms

Foreword by Dane Ortlund



WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Foreword

THE WONDROUS SECRET soaking this anguish-laden universe is a divine love that befriends and embraces and even substitutes for the undeserving. Sam Storms knows this. And in *The Steadfast Love of the Lord*, he takes us into the wonders of that love as only he can.

I say "as only he can" because Sam is a rare constellation of at least four giftings. And in God's mercy Sam has proven himself over the years to be experienced and faithful—and therefore trusted—in each one.

First, Sam is an exegete. He loves the Bible, and he handles it well. Coming upon biblical texts in this book is like coming upon lush greenery in a jungle, confronting us at each step. Sam was trained well early on in the original languages and in how to handle God's word, and that facility with the text has deepened rather than plateaued over his many years of pastoring and teaching. Sam knows that without a Bible he would have nothing to say. And he operates accordingly.

Second, Sam is a theologian. He thinks deeply and wisely and biblically about God. He thinks with balance and nuance when called for but also with boldness and courage when called for. He

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is well aware of the past generations of church leaders who have gone before us, and therefore is not drawn to passing theological fads. He does theology in the context of the local church. He sings and celebrates his theology, rather than only dissect and analyze. He is everything a Christian theologian should be.

Third, Sam is a pastor. A shepherd. He writes not to build himself up but to build the flock up. And so he aims not only at our minds but at our hearts through our minds, for he's after the soul. That's what animates every faithful shepherd. The obvious goal of this book, consistent with Sam's whole life, is to address the real-life agitations of soul that each one of us is negotiating every hour of every day. Even in seasons of life serving as a professor, Sam has given himself with all his heart to the local church.

Fourth, Sam is a lover. He is a man of burning heart and bright energies and strong affections. He does not write and teach with flat emotional monotony. If he did, he would betray the very subject matter of this book. God's love for his own is uproarious, sparkling with the explosive delight of which the most profound human affections are a faint mirage. The author of *The Steadfast Love of the Lord* lives his life, and writes this book, acutely mindful of this love. Such a man deserves our attention when he sits down to write of this grand theme.

I can't resist adding a fifth point that made the reading of this manuscript a joy—he's a friend. I commend this book to you accordingly. Throughout the spring of 2001, as a twenty-two-yearold, I sat on the second floor of Jenks Hall at Wheaton College as Dr. Storms walked us through the basic tenets of evangelical systematic theology. But he not only taught me; he befriended me, through lunches and prayer times. And he has been a friend and encourager ever since. What startled me wonderfully in that 2001 Wheaton class was not so much the content of what was taught but the tone with which that content about God was handled—the tone of celebration, the reverence in handling God's very word, the wonder at God's beauty, the humility at being delivered by grace and grace alone, the longing for every student to experience God's endless wonders as we sat with Bible open. This is the very tone you will find in this book.

> Dane Ortlund SENIOR PASTOR, NAPERVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH; AUTHOR, GENTLE AND LOWLY

Introduction

Doubting the Love of God

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE, and it needs to happen before you read another word of this book. Rarely in my Christian life have I struggled with doubt. My faith has almost always been rock-solid and robust. Sure, there were times when I was confused by things I read in Scripture, times when I shook my head in measured disbelief. But I don't believe I ever seriously wavered in my confidence that God is both good and loving.

Then a 7.8 earthquake struck southeastern Turkey in the spring of 2023. You may remember that day, as word began to spread of several thousand who had died in the rubble of countless buildings and homes that crumbled like they were made of toothpicks. At first, the report was that 6,000 had perished. Later that same day, the number grew to 15,000. The next day, we were told that it was over 30,000 and would probably increase as the rescue efforts escalated. The last time I checked the death toll had risen to over 59,000.

Joseph Stalin, Russian dictator who succeeded Vladimir Lenin in the aftermath of the October Revolution, is reported to have said, "One death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic."¹ How coldly brutal and uncaring that is. But I understand the sentiment. As the number of those who died in Turkey and Syria continued to climb each day, I began to lose sight that each number represented a human being, several thousand of whom were under the age of five. We weep over one death, but a fog of indifference clouds our souls when the number is so great that the people who died become little more than an unidentifiable mass.

The news broke that one woman gave birth beneath the pile of heavy slabs of concrete under which she was buried. Her newborn infant survived, but she did not. That was hard enough for me to swallow. Then I watched on the news as another grieving mother rocked her lifeless two-month-old baby boy in her arms. I couldn't hold back the tears and, well, the anger too. "God, where are you? Where were you when this happened? I know your power is without limit and that you could have as easily put a stop to the earthquake with as little effort as Jesus exerted when he silenced the wind and waves on the Sea of Galilee. So why did you let this happen?"

I knew I was drawing close to crossing a line in my complaint to the Lord. Oh, how very close I came to accusing him of sin, of failing to act consistently with what he says about himself in Scripture, of not caring about the depths of pain and anguish so many people had experienced.

It was then that I began to struggle with the reality of God's love. Honestly, I'm still struggling. You may think it odd that I would write a book extolling the steadfast love of God at the same time I'm wrestling with doubts about it in my heart. But I'm not being duplicitous. I have no desire to be a hypocrite. I simply realized

^{1 &}quot;Joseph Stalin, 1879–1953," in Oxford Essential Quotations, ed. Susan Ratcliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://www.oxfordreference.com/.

that the only way I was going to press through this dark season in my soul was to bathe it in the repeated theme of Scripture that "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases" (Lam. 3:22).

I wish I could say that my heart is now at perfect peace when contemplating the truth of God's steadfast love, but alas, it is not. However, I am sufficiently calm and convinced that what the Bible says about God is true and so I can proceed with writing this short book. In fact, the more I thought and prayed about it, the more I came to the same conclusion of the disciples in John 6 when the difficult words of Jesus had driven away so many of his professed followers. "Do you want to go away as well?" Jesus asked them (John 6:67). Peter spoke for all of them (and for me too) when he replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Where else can I turn if not to the truth of the steadfast, neverending, always-faithful love of God? Even if I can't account for earthquakes in Turkey or tornadoes in my home state of Oklahoma or widespread famine in Sudan, what options do I have? What options do you have? If God's love isn't real and steady and ultimately steadfast, what hope do any of us have? To what philosophy of life will we turn? To the words of what sage will we listen?

As I began writing this book, I received an email from a man in my church here in Oklahoma City. He had a question for me, one that I struggled to answer:

Sam,

I have a good friend whose oldest son committed suicide a few days ago. I was wondering if you could share a few high-level insights/wisdom from your experience with walking with someone going through this. So far, the little I've been able to talk with my friend I've just said I'm sorry and asked what I can do. Some things I've thought about are:

What kind of answer would you give to a question of why God would allow something like this? How is God good if this happens?

How does this become redeemed for good?

How is this God's love for me, my family, and my dead son? Etc . . .

Again, he hasn't asked any of these questions, but, when appropriate, I want to point him to the scripture and Jesus. My primary answer in my mind is, "I don't know, and I'm sorry this happened." Any thoughts you'd have I'd welcome.²

How would you have answered an email like this? I certainly didn't want to respond with a series of spiritual platitudes that sound insightful but ultimately accomplish little. I don't know if this helped, but this is what I wrote back to him:

The last thing that someone who's experienced this sort of tragedy wants to hear is a theological explanation of why it happened. Even if you could give him one, it wouldn't diminish the pain or sense of loss he feels. Situations like this remind me of Job. He lost all his children and possessions and his "friends" labored to give him an explanation why it happened. This only aggravated his condition. When these things happen, the best thing to do is to keep your mouth shut and sit and weep with your friend. You are right when you say "I don't know" is the best response. We don't know why these things happen and God doesn't tell

² This quotation is from the author's personal experience.

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us. What he tells us is that he is good and will never leave or forsake us. That may not help much, but anything else or more will only sound flippant and uncaring to him.

I'm not suggesting we are always in the wrong for trying to decipher God's ways and to make sense of what strikes us as senseless. But in some instances, such as this man's loss of his son, I am more inclined to put my hand over my mouth and simply reflect on Paul's words in Romans 11:33–36:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

I know that sounds like a cop-out. In fact, it almost comes across as one of those spiritual platitudes that I earlier said I would never espouse. But let's be honest. What other options are there? To theologize this man's loss of his son to suicide, as if any of us is capable of accounting for why God performs or permits such tragedies to occur, sounds trivial to the hurting heart. Indescribably painful too. I could envision this father saying in response, "My son's life is worth more than a doctrinal declaration. How can you so casually write off his tragic and premature death with your supposed insight into the mysteries of the universe?"

So where does that leave us? If it's OK with you, I'm going to stick with the apostle Paul. Do you really believe there are other viable options? I don't. I'm left clinging in my feeble, oh-so-very-tenuous

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faith to the unsearchable judgments and inscrutable ways of God. I simply don't know where or to whom I can turn, other than to say that "all things"—yes, even the incomprehensibly devastating death of one's child—are "from" God and exist "through" God and ultimately will be seen as bringing glory and honor "to" God.

After more than a half century in Christian ministry, after hearing and personally witnessing countless instances of this sort of disastrous news, I remain a believer in the steadfast love of God. That doesn't mean I can easily explain why this man's son took his own life or why God allowed the earthquake in Turkey, the slaughter of millions by Stalin, the deaths incurred during COVID-19, or the sexual abuse of precious young children all around our country. I can't. And neither can you. But if God's love is no more than a pipe dream, a cloud without rain, a promise with no hope of fulfillment, then we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19).

But don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that the only or even primary reason I remain confident of the truth of God's love is that I have no other options, far less because it provides me with the psychological boost I need to get out of bed each day. I believe it and am happy to write about it for at least three reasons.

First, I believe it because the Holy Spirit has strengthened my inner being with divine power to "comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:18–19). There is indelibly imprinted in the innermost recesses of my soul the unshakeable conviction that God is love. I didn't put it there. The Holy Spirit did.

More than that, the Holy Spirit has deeply embedded in my soul an unassailable assurance that what Scripture says about God's love is true. He has opened the eyes of my heart and enlightened my feeble mind to rest confidently in the truth of the inspired text that tells me repeatedly that God's love is genuine and steadfast.

Finally, I believe in God's steadfast love because of the way it was demonstrated in the gift from God the Father of God the Son to die for me on the cross as expressed in passages like Romans 5:6–11 and 8:32. I'll have more to say later about these passages, but let it be known now that the only explanation for the cross of Christ is the steadfast love of God for his own. The apostle John said it best and most succinctly: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9–10).

Yes, I'll continue to grapple in my heart with the multitude of natural disasters that I wake up to almost every day. And I will not offer trite explanations for why humans continue to commit horrid acts of perversion and evil against each other. Even if I could, no one, not even me, would be convinced by them. But I cannot, I will not, allow my intellectual shortcomings to account for the problem of evil to blind me to the bright light of the everlasting, unchanging, soul-saving, steadfast love of God.

1

Love Is Love. Or Is It?

IT ONLY MAKES SENSE that before we dive into an exploration of the steadfast love of God that we define love itself. You may think that's a no-brainer, but the distortions of love in our world today have made this a somewhat arduous task.

You may remember when news broke that contemporary Christian music icon Amy Grant decided to host a so-called same-sex wedding on her property. In response to the pushback she received, this is what she said: "I never chase any of those rabbits down the rabbit hole. I love my family, I love those brides. They're wonderful, our family is better, and you should be able to be who you are with your family, and be loved by them."¹

She previously told the *Washington Post* how she justified in her mind the same-sex wedding, saying that she was just loving them like Jesus would: "Jesus, you just narrowed it down to two things: love God and love each other"... I mean, hey—that's pretty simple."² In case you

Brenton Blanchet and Topher Gauk-Roger, "Amy Grant on Homophobic Criticism Over Niece's Same-Sex Wedding: 'I Love Those Brides,'" *People*, January 16, 2023, https://people.com/.

² Blanchet and Gauk-Roger, "Amy Grant on Homophobic Criticism."

haven't figured it out by now, her definition of "love" affirms whatever lifestyle choices a person prefers as morally legitimate. On this view, it is hateful or bigoted to suggest that such a marriage is sinful, immoral, and potentially exposes an individual to eternal damnation.

I've always appreciated Grant, her professed commitment to Christ, and, yes, her music as well. My purpose in citing this incident isn't to cast aspersions on her character but simply to highlight how the world and its mindset has infected the Christian community with its distorted and profoundly unbiblical understanding of what constitutes love.

Most of us have at some point felt or experienced what we believed was love. For some of you, it was that tingling sensation in your abdomen or perhaps a shiver down your spine when you first came into contact with that special someone. For others, it was the thrill of being in the presence of a person who had captivated your affections and made you feel special and highly valued. Some would insist that love has nothing to do with feelings at all but is entirely a volitional choice to bless another or to sacrifice greatly for their welfare. These are expressions of love in horizontal relationships between men and women. But what do the biblical authors mean when they speak of God's steadfast love for sinners like you and me? Sadly, there is considerable confusion today when it comes to nailing down a definition of love.

Defining Love

These days I regularly see a new slogan emblazoned on T-shirts, the bumper stickers of cars, placards held high at rallies, and even the back of the football helmets of NFL players: "Love is love!"

My first reaction, as you might guess, is to ask a question of any person promoting this philosophy, "Please, define 'love.'" The answer in return would probably be something along the lines of, "I just did. I said, 'love is love.'" This answer is obviously circular, and any attempt to communicate meaningfully with a person who takes this approach is probably doomed from the outset.

So what do people mean when they say that "Love is love"? Unless I'm mistaken, I think they mean what Amy Grant meant that love is always accepting, never critical, entirely inclusive, and altogether affirming of the moral legitimacy of anything a person believes and however they choose to behave. To push back and argue that certain beliefs are false is not loving. It is hateful. To suggest that a particular lifestyle is morally perverse is not loving. It is bigoted. To employ any language that does not affirm the truth or legitimacy of something another person believes or does is an expression of intolerance and will probably subject you to being cancelled in some way.

It's important to observe the transformation of a crucial term in our world today: tolerance. Tolerance once meant granting a person the freedom to believe whatever they want and behave however they choose as long as neither their belief nor behavior was detrimental to another person or society at large. So there was always a limit to tolerance, a certain boundary beyond which one could not go. But no longer.

Tolerance today means not only that you don't interfere with or prohibit someone from believing a certain idea or doctrine that differs from your own but also that you vigorously affirm that their belief is just as true and legitimate as yours. Tolerance has effectively prohibited any use of the words "wrong," "misguided," "false," and "immoral." Of course, the great irony in this is that saying, in the name of tolerance, that it is "wrong" or "misguided" to claim that someone else's belief or behavior is "wrong" or "misguided" is, by their own definition, profoundly intolerant! But I won't linger on that point here.³

The best illustration of this is the furious debate in our society over the subject of homosexuality and transgenderism. In Romans 12:9 Paul exhorts us to "let love be genuine," and in Romans 12:10 he commands us to "love one another with brotherly affection." But he also says in Romans 1 that some expressions of human sexuality are impure, dishonorable, contrary to nature, shameful, and deserving of eternal judgment. So how can one be loving and yet say such things about homosexual conduct?

I suspect that many people in our society, perhaps even most, would insist that it is impossible to consistently embrace both positions. As noted, they argue that to tell someone that his or her sexual behavior is dishonorable and shameful is not loving, and if we are to love someone, we must affirm their choices and never suggest that what they are doing is morally impure or wrong or sinful. This would appear to be the stance assumed by Grant.

I bring this to our attention yet again because of events in Finland that unfolded in 2022. The news was all over the internet regarding "a Christian politician from Finland who ha[d] been formally charged with three counts of hate speech against homosexuals and face[d] two years in prison if convicted."⁴ According to one news outlet, Paivi Rasanen,

a member of the Finnish Parliament, has been under investigation since 2019 for social media posts questioning the Evangelical

³ For a fuller treatment of this subject, see D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

⁴ Dale Hurd, "Finnish Lawmaker Faces Trial for Hate Speech After Quoting the Bible About Homosexuality," CBN, April 30, 2021, https://www2.cbn.com/.

Lutheran Church's official affiliation with the Helsinki LGBT Pride event. In her posts, Rasanen showed a photo of the Bible passage Romans 1:24–27, which condemns homosexuality as a sin. She is also charged for a pamphlet she wrote in 2004 entitled "Male and female He created them: Homosexual relationships challenge the Christian concept of humanity," in which she said that God designed marriage for one man and one woman. And she's accused of hate speech for comments she made about homosexuality on a Christian TV program in Finland.⁵

Rasanen courageously stood by her convictions and refused to apologize for her writings or for the writings of the apostle Paul. As I write this chapter, I learned that though the initial charges against her were dropped, they had recently been revived. I'm sure that by the time of this book's publication a final verdict will have been rendered.

I contend that what Rasanen said and wrote is a profound expression of love and compassion, and that for her *not* to have spoken in such terms would have been an equally profound expression of hate and utter disregard for the temporal and eternal welfare of practicing homosexuals. Let me say it clearly: to tell someone who is living in unrepentant homosexuality that his or her behavior is dishonorable, morally wrong, and puts their soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation is the most loving thing you could possibly say to them. I know that this runs counter to our society's perspective today, but I don't regard the world or its opinions as authoritative. Only God's written word is authoritative. Only Scripture is decisive in telling me what is right and wrong and what the eternal consequences of both are.

⁵ Hurd, "Finnish Lawmaker Faces Trial for Hate Speech."

And that leads me to what may well be the most important thing I can say regarding this issue—the entire debate and the division that it creates boils down to a question of one's ultimate moral authority. You have a choice to make, and you have only two options: either you acknowledge and submit to the authoritative statements of the Bible or you acknowledge and submit to the passions, feelings, and opinions of your own soul. Either God defines your identity in his word or you define it according to your good pleasure. Either God decides what is true, good, false, and evil or you do. Either you believe that personal identity is self-chosen, self-constructed, based on one's personal preferences and desires or you believe that it is God-given and defined by him in Scripture. Either the God of the Bible is your God or your own autonomous self is your god.

So when the Bible says that sexual relations between two people of the same gender is sinful, either you embrace that as morally definitive because the Bible is authoritative or you reject it because your own soul is authoritative. What is it going to be—self or Scripture? Who or what is your final authority? Once that is decided, the rest of what lies before us is quite simple. Once that is decided, the meaning of true and genuine love is quite simple.

Yet, if we choose God's way, we face another type of obstacle in addressing this issue—how we will be treated by the world. Simply stated, to believe what the Bible says on this subject is to open yourself to the charge of homophobia. Although that word literally means "a fear of homosexuality," it is used today as part of a strategy of intimidation to silence Christians and squash dissent from the mainstream view. Christians will also be charged with being intolerant and bigoted. Others will accuse us of being opposed to diversity and guilty of discrimination. Some will even claim that by speaking critically of homosexual behavior, we incite violence against people who are attracted to someone of the same sex. Thus, we will be mocked and ridiculed for holding to what is considered an outmoded, outdated, primitive understanding of human sexuality. Moreover, embracing the authority of God on this issue may well put us in legal jeopardy, be that in the form of criminal charges (as in Finland), a monetary fine, or getting cancelled.

So what are we to do? The answer, at least to me, is obvious. We humbly search out Scripture to determine what it says about human sexual behavior and we then embrace it and submit to it, no matter the social or personal cost that may entail. "But Sam," some will say, "why is it important for us to address this topic? Why can't we just skip over Romans 1 and other biblical texts and move on to more important matters?"

The answer is obvious. We must address this issue because (1) the Bible does! Our primary commitment is to truth, and this must take precedence over all other considerations; (2) we cannot fully follow Christ if our sexuality is out of step with God's design; (3) the urgency of our specific time and place in history demands that we speak out; and (4) unrepentant homosexual conduct puts a person's soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation.

Now, let me say three more things about how we are to love other people. First, we must denounce any tendency by anyone to dehumanize homosexuals or to suggest that they are not made in the image of God. People who struggle with same-sex attraction are just as human as you and deserve to be treated with as much dignity as you. Second, our attitude toward those who identify as homosexual or who struggle with same-sex attraction must be one of loving concern, compassion, and a desire to help. Third, we should pray that what we say about homosexuality, together with the way that we all interact with and respond to people who struggle in this regard, will make them want to stay in our churches, not run away. We must labor to speak and act in such a way that all people, regardless of their sexual conduct, will find in us a loving, helping, and compassionate church. Simply put, the church of Jesus Christ should be a place where those who experience same-sex attraction can find the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome their sinful desires and change or, if not, can find the strength, courage, help, and love from us to live a joyful and triumphant life of celibacy.

So is love "love"? As we've seen, it all depends on how you define "love." My definition, the Bible's definition, is that "love" is acting and speaking in such a way that the object of one's affection is blessed in this life and in the age to come. It is never loving to speak or act in such a way that a person is encouraged to continue to believe or behave in a manner that, according to Scripture, puts their soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation (1 Cor. 6:9–11; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:5–6). To truly love a person you must say and do all that you can to direct them to beliefs and behaviors that align with their eternal destiny in the presence of God in the new heaven and new earth. That is love.

God's Love for Us

So what about God's love? To speak of our love for other men and women is one thing. But this book is concerned with God's love for us. To put it as simply as possible, to say that God loves us means that he is passionately committed to providing us with whatever is needed so that we might flourish now and in eternity. It means he is devoted to satisfying our souls with the one thing that will thoroughly captivate our hearts now and forevermore. And that one thing is himself! This certainly calls for some explanation. And in order to make sense of it all I need to demonstrate the connection between what is known as Christian hedonism and the love of God for sinners like you and me. The problem we face is that Scripture presents to us two undeniable truths that on the surface appear to be mutually exclusive. One would think that it simply isn't possible to hold both simultaneously. The first and most obvious truth of Scripture is that God has created the universe, which includes us, in order that he might be glorified. God's preeminent passion is to draw attention to himself and to display the majestic beauty of his own being. To be perfectly blunt about it, God's chief end in all he does is himself. But if God is preeminently for himself, how can he be for me and you? If his first and greatest love is for himself, how can he love us at all?

God's love for himself strikes us at first glance to be profoundly selfish and utterly at odds with what Scripture says about his love for us. It appears to rule out any possibility that he can sincerely love people in a way that is real and heartfelt. But the apparent contradiction is only a mirage.

To understand this, let's return to our fundamental definition of love. If God is to truly love us, he must be altogether consumed to provide us with the greatest joy, gladness, and satisfaction of soul that is possible for a human to experience. So how might he do that? The answer is obvious, once you've given it some thought. If God is to fill our hearts and minds with the greatest degree of delight and joy, he would have to give us the most delightful and joyful person in the universe. And who might that be? God, of course!

Christian Hedonism and the Steadfast Love of God

There was a time when I thought my happiness and God's glory were mutually exclusive.⁶ I had to choose between one or the other;

⁶ Portions of this section are taken from Sam Storms, "Christian Hedonism: Piper and Edwards on the Pursuit of Joy in God," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Used by permission.

embracing them both struck me as out of the question. Worse still, enjoying God sounded a bit too lighthearted, almost casual, perhaps even flippant, and I knew that Christianity was serious business.

Then I read Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and his contemporary disciple (and now my longtime friend) John Piper. These two men helped me to see that God's glory and my gladness were not antithetical. They helped me see that at the core of Scripture is the truth that my heart's passion for pleasure (which is God-given, not the result of sin) and God's passion for praise converge in a way that makes sense of all human existence. There is one statement from Edwards that is one of the most significant and life-changing utterances I've ever read. He writes,

Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed? An understanding of the perfections of God, merely, cannot be the end of the creation; for he had as good not understand it, as see it and not be at all moved with joy at the sight. Neither can the highest end of creation be the declaring God's glory to others; for the declaring God's glory is good for nothing otherwise than to raise joy in ourselves and others at what is declared.⁷

Edwards's point is that passionate and joyful admiration of God—not merely acknowledgement and intellectual apprehension—is the aim of our existence. If God is to be supremely glorified in us, we must be supremely glad in him and in what he has done for us in Jesus. Enjoying God is not a secondary, tangential endeavor. It is central to everything we do, especially worship. We

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 200.

do not do other things hoping that joy in God will emerge as a by-product. Our reason for pursuing God and obeying him is to gain the joy that is found in him alone. Ultimately, to worship him for any reason other than the joy that is found in him is sinful.

Some object to Christian hedonism because of their aversion to the notion that we are to seek our joyful satisfaction in God without limitations or boundaries. I was greatly helped in overcoming my own struggle with this by something Edwards said in his sermon on the Song of Solomon 5:1. Here is Edwards's translation of the text: "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved."⁸ Although most today believe that the Song of Solomon addresses the love relationship between husband and wife, Edwards stood in the tradition that dominated church history for its first 1,800 years by arguing that this book was an allegory or poetic portrayal of the love relationship between Christ and the church or believer. His sermon on this text, preached in 1729, was titled "Spiritual Appetites Need No Bounds."

Edwards's main point is that when it comes to satisfying our souls with the spiritual delights and joys found in Christ, there are no excesses, no boundaries, no limitations. Edwards refers to these affections and desires as holy "inclinations." He continues,

Persons neither need nor ought to keep those inclinations and desires from increasing to any degree whatsoever, and there cannot be a too frequent or too powerful exercise of them. . . . By not setting any bounds to those appetites, is meant not laying any restraint upon ourselves with respect to gratifying of them. Persons may indulge them as much as they please; they may

⁸ Kyle C. Strobel, Adriaan C. Neele, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *Jonathan Edwards*, *Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 142.

give themselves their full swing. They may not only allow a very eager thirst and enlarged desire, but they may drink their fill; there is no excess. . . . They may drink, yea, swim in the rivers of spiritual pleasure.⁹

When Edwards turned to make application of this truth, he urged all "to promote spiritual appetites by laying yourself in the way of allurement."¹⁰ What he meant by this is that we are responsible for taking advantage of every opportunity to position our souls in a way that will increase the potential and likelihood for us to be captivated and satisfied by the blessings offered in Christ. Again, he writes,

We ought to take all opportunities to lay ourselves in the way of enticement with respect to our gracious inclinations. Thus you should be often with God in prayer, and then you will be in the way of having your heart drawn forth to him. We ought to be frequent in reading and constant in hearing the word. And particularly to this end, we ought carefully and with the utmost seriousness and consideration attend the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: this was appointed for this end, to draw forth the longings of our souls toward Jesus Christ.¹¹

I can't envision any better news for the believer than this. God, because of his steadfast love, has prepared an exquisite banquet for us of the most glorious truths, promises, power, and blessings possible. So come and eat to the full! Come and drink and be satis-

⁹ Strobel, Neele, and Minkema, Jonathan Edwards, 145-46.

¹⁰ Strobel, Neele, and Minkema, Jonathan Edwards, 151.

¹¹ Strobel, Neele, and Minkema, Jonathan Edwards, 151.

fied with all that God is for you in Jesus! Indulge yourself. There is no such thing as too much! Or, as Piper has said so often before, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied and filled with the joy of knowing him in Christ Jesus.¹² That is the essence of Christian hedonism.

The next step is a difficult one for some to take. It is one thing to say that God is most glorified in our glad-hearted delight in him. It is something else entirely to say our glad-hearted passion for God is exceeded only by God's glad-hearted passion for himself. If the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever, the chief end of God is to glorify God and to enjoy himself forever!

I'm talking about the preeminent passion in God's heart, his greatest and singular delight. In what does God rejoice most? Or to put it bluntly, what is God's greatest love? I believe that the preeminent passion in God's heart is his own glory. God is at the center of his own affections. The supreme love of God's life is God. God is preeminently committed to the fame of his name. God is himself the end for which he created the world. Better still, God's immediate goal in all he does is his own glory. God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys, and delivers in order to make known who he is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor, and glory that he and he alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy of.

The question I most often hear in response to this is that if God loves himself preeminently, how can he love me at all? How can we say that God is for us and that he desires our happiness if he is primarily for himself and his own glory? I want to argue that it is precisely *because* God loves himself that he loves you. Here's how:

¹² John Piper, Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 17–28.

I assume you will agree that your greatest good consists of enjoying, delighting in, and being indescribably satisfied with the most excellent Being in the universe. That Being, of course, is God. Therefore, the most loving and kind thing that God can do for you is to devote all his energy and effort to elicit from your heart praise of himself. Why? Because praise is the consummation of your enjoyment. All enjoyment tends toward praise and adoration as its appointed end. In this way, God seeking his own glory and God seeking your good converge.

Listen again. Your greatest good is in the enjoyment of God. God's greatest glory is in being enjoyed. So God seeking his glory in your worship of him is the most loving thing he can do for you. Only by seeking his glory preeminently can God seek your good passionately. God working for your enjoyment of him (that's his love for you) and his glory in being enjoyed (that's his love for himself) are not properly separate.

To help you understand more clearly the nature of Christian hedonism and how it relates to God's steadfast love for his people, I direct your attention to something C. S. Lewis discovered and wrote about in an essay titled "A Word about Praising." It is found in his short volume *Reflections on the Psalms*.¹³ Lewis helped me to recognize that the enjoyment of God is an essential feature of Christian worship. He roots this conclusion in the nature of praise itself: "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."¹⁴ Lewis continued, "I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it . . .

¹³ C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 90-98.

¹⁴ Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 94.

Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible."¹⁵

What Lewis is touching on here is how the steadfast love of God for sinners like you and me is ultimately made manifest. God desires our greatest good, which is undeniably our experience of himself. So if God is truly to love us, he must give us himself. But giving us himself is only the first step in the expression of his affection for sinners. He must work to elicit from our hearts rapturous praise and superlative delight because, as Lewis said, "all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise." That's the way God made us. We can't help but praise and rejoice in what we most enjoy. The enjoyment itself is stunted and hindered if it is never expressed in joyful celebration.

So, if I understand Lewis correctly, he's telling us that God's pursuit of my praise of him is not self-seeking but the epitome of self-giving, steadfast love! If my satisfaction in him is incomplete until expressed in praise of him for satisfying me with himself, then God's effort to elicit my worship (what Lewis before thought was inexcusable selfishness) is both the most loving thing he could possibly do for me and the most glorifying thing he could possibly do for himself, for my gladness in him (not his gifts but his intrinsic beauty) is his glory in me. This, then, is the essence and beauty of Christian hedonism and the nature of God's steadfast love for us.

¹⁵ Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 94.