
A Testimony to the Gospel of the Grace of God

Acts 20:24

Introduction

A mature servant used to help an immature servant

Under God, a teacher of the Scriptures who has shaped my thought and life profoundly is John Piper. Through his books and tapes and modeling, God rescued me from dry academia and dull living to serve Him as an elder. I often desired, therefore, to give thanks publicly to God in front of God's people for God's servant. His latest book *Pierced by the Word* convinced me that the time is come.

And so I desire to pay tribute to a man of God; a sinner saved and kept by grace; Dr. John Piper by preaching a few messages. I will set out to do this by featuring and preaching from Piper's newest book *Pierced by the Word*. And I desire to do this in such a way that God will get all the glory as He creates in us a stronger desire for Him. And that this passion for Him will be made clear in three areas; 1) Worship 2) Discipleship 3) Evangelism

My tribute to the grace of God tasted through Dr. Piper will start with my journey into the doctrines of grace. How God revived a solid-in-doctrine yet sagging-in-desire preacher and brought him to Clearcreek Chapel is the topic tonight. The next two Sunday evenings will be used to glorify God by preaching two messages largely shaped by Piper's new book. Let's begin with a testimony of God's grace.

A Testimony to the gospel of the grace of God

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24).

Desiring God; June of 1992

Narration

My journey into the gospel of the grace of God looked something like this.

Said John Piper, "The world has an inconsolable longing. It tries to satisfy the longing with scenic vacations, accomplishments of creativity, stunning cinematic productions, sexual exploits, sports extravaganzas, hallucinogenic drugs, ascetic rigors, managerial excellence,

etc” (J. Piper; *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*; p.8). But in all my endeavors, my longing remained. That is, until 1984. In that year my world was turned upside down. I was converted to Christ. I had become a Christian. The things I held dear were no longer precious to me. I saw for the first time that there is no reality more breathtaking than Jesus Christ. My quest for the deepest and most enduring joy was over. God through a small group Bible study terminated my hunt for happiness in Jesus Christ. I repented of my sin and trusted God for my forgiveness. Though my interpretation of that event was not yet biblical, the reality of new birth was.

For the next nine years God shaped my thought and life through Bible believers. There was the God-besotted missionary in the Philippines. There was a good para-church organization. There was my roommate in college. There were Dr. Friesen and the faculty at Multnomah Bible college and seminary. There was my pastor. In these nine years I learned much. Convictions over the doctrines of grace had started. My roommate and I were dubbed Calvinists (though I wasn't sure what they meant). I read Sproul and MacArthur. I was examining the various views. I enjoyed a good debate over “Lordship Salvation”.

All in all, these years were good years. The examination of and explanation of true doctrine was on the rise. There was, however, something absent.

I finished my formal Bible training in the Spring of '92. Lisa and I were six months into our marriage. She was two months pregnant with Brittany. I was in contact with my district superintendent as we explored where I might serve as a pastor. Everything appeared to be in order...except my heart. When I graduated with my master's of divinity it felt like they handed me a jigsaw puzzle in a box; many parts but no picture. Much analysis with little synthesis led to great paralysis.

I was scared. I was dry. I was in need of grace. My attitudes of unbelief were many. High in panic and low in passion were two noticeable ones. My soul needed God!

Lisa and I were at a poolside one day. Due to my condition I looked for a book which could help me. Before we went to the pool, I went to my library. I saw a book I hadn't read. I bought it in the Fall of '87 due to its intriguing title. I didn't, however, make the time to read it. In the Spring of '92 traveling to the pool, I yearned for what the title of that book held out; *Desiring God*.

I knew I was made to glorify God. I knew I was made to obey Him. What I did know was how obedience to the revealed, moral will of God was “the good news of great joy” (Lk.2:10). Realizing without relishing the doctrines of God gave me little joy. How can God's pas-

sion to be glorified and my passion to be satisfied come together? Do I have to choose between duty to God and delight to my heart?

I began reading *Desiring God*. Stunned was I. Like seeing Lisa coming down the aisle dressed in white my heart ached. Things I thought about but never would talk about were actually written down. I had never heard anyone diagnose my problem and its suitable solution like John Piper did. Text upon text and reason upon reason he made clear four liberating truths.

- The longing to be happy is a universal human experience and it is good; not sinful.

I had the tacit notion that to deny my desire for joy in order to worship God and serve people was virtuous. I came to see that this was fundamentally in opposition to how I was made and how I was to glorify God. As hunger in the stomach is to food on a plate our desire in the heart is to God on the throne. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world” (p.104-5).

Simply coming to terms with how I was made primed me for the next liberating truth.

- We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy as though it were a bad impulse. Rather we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.

Like awaking after a night sleep, I was becoming animated over God. I had permission to say “I want to be happy”. I was even commanded to pursue my joy (Ps.37:4). And this joy must be premium and permanent lest I fall into idolatry (i.e. terminating my hunt for happiness in anything less than God). Where do I discover this type of joy? How can I taste of this type of pleasure? Is this what grace is all about? I could not wait to read more of *Desiring God* and my Bible.

And when I did I came across the third liberating truth.

- The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God.

I felt like I finally came home when I read Ps.16:11. “You will make known to me the path of life. And in your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand there are pleasures forever”. Full and forever was the joy in God! This quenching, life-transforming joy was not to be found His gifts. It was to be enjoyed in Himself;

his manifold perfections; his exquisite beauty; his breathtaking glory!

He was the end of my quest; not the means of some further joy. To realize and relish “the Almighty [as my] gold and choice silver...” (Job 22:25) was like being born again all over again. The doctrines of grace finally were sensible to my mind. They were no longer a list of some things. They were Someone. I was not merely to see principles. I was to savor a Person. To honor God as my treasure meant that I experienced him as my unrivaled pleasure. This was a sunrise moment for me. My mind was sobering. My heart was softening. My joy was here!

How does this relate to worship and discipleship and evangelism? The next liberating truth pressed me toward the pastorate.

- The happiness we find in God reaches its consummation when it is shared with others in the manifold ways of love.

I was coming to realize that God was most glorified in me when I was most satisfied in Him. And that my delight in Him dilates when I praise Him in spirit and truth. What an amazing arrangement God put together. God pursues His glory in my pursuit of gladness when my pursuit of gladness ends in His glory. A life-transformation this was in the area of worship.

What I did not understand was how this joy in God related to fellowship / discipleship and evangelism.

What Piper did in his book was make clear a philosophy of life shaped and stimulated by the Bible. How the gladness in God giving glory to God relates to all of life was the rest of the book. He demonstrated how it related to my being a husband and a father and a pastor and a steward and a neighbor. He convinced me that “joy inexpressible and full of glory” shrivels if it is not shared. This sharing in the manifold ways of love is costly. Giving up my agenda and taking the posture of a servant was the way of joy. Jesus said, “it is more blessed to give than to receive”. Gladly helping others become glad in God was evangelism and discipleship .

June of '92 was a dramatic discovery! For the next year I devoured J. Piper's book *Desiring God*.

The Pleasures of God; October of 1993

The next Piper book I came across in the formation of my view of life came just weeks before moving to Montana to pastor my first church. I was convinced of Piper's thesis in *Desiring God*. I understood that God is magnified when my soul was satisfied in His beauty and per-

fections. What I needed more than anything prior to preaching God in a local church was to see why this was so. What I needed most was to see the beauty and perfections of God. I needed to see clearly who God is and what God is up to before I could preach God to others. *The Pleasures of God* changed my life forever.

Here is how Piper helped me.

Piper mentions that the book *The Pleasures of God* was born out of a reading of a small book called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Henry Scougal. The sentence that catapulted Piper into writing was this. “The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love”. How else, Piper thought, could one evaluate an invisible soul than by noticing what it delighted in? Whatever the heart really enjoyed and desired was the gage to determine its moral quality. But some, he argued, may say differently. To assess the heart one would look at what it thinks.

- ❖ By what it thinks?
 - ❖ But clear and accurate thought is beautiful only in the service of right affections

Others may say

- ❖ By what it wills?
 - ❖ But there is half-hearted willing; a mere teeth-gritting determination
- ❖ Piper’s answer:
 - ❖ To know a soul’s proportions you need to know its passions. Not what we dutifully will but what we passionately want reveals our excellence or evil.

When I began to think upon this idea my mind went to where Piper was going. If this is true of people could it be true of God? Could I see Him truly and savor Him duly if I took notice of what He took most pleasure in? Piper said it this way.

- ❖ “IF God’s love is his powerful and prevalent passion - the omnipotent energy of his approval and enjoyment and delight - then “the pleasures of God” are the measure of the excellency of his soul.
- ❖ AND IF the excellence of God could be admired in his pleasures
- ❖ AND IF we tend to conform to what we admire

- ❖ THEN focusing on the pleasures of God could help [us] be conformed to God. Cf. 2Cor.3:18

I now saw for the first time that the deepest pleasure of God is Himself. God must love and delight in his own beauty and perfection above all things. The essence of righteousness is to set the full, energetic affections of the heart on what is truly and infinitely valuable. God is holy. And so, God is righteous by always being the object of his love. This became my granite foundation for my eternal security and assurance of my perseverance. It was clear as a cloudless moon that the command to “delight yourselves in the Lord” was simply to copy what God does. My quest for holiness and happiness is patterned after God. Oh, the liberation and power coming over me as I went out to Montana to preach the matchless beauty of God in October of ‘93

Time fails me to talk on:

The Supremacy of God in Preaching; November of 1993

The mission of preaching is worship. And that the matter of preaching is exposition of the glories of God. And that the manner of preaching is the exultation over the glories of God.

Let the Nations be Glad; October of 1995

How passion for God in worship comes before offering God in evangelism and missions. You cannot commend what you do not cherish. We do not proclaim what we do not prize!

The Justification of God; October of 1995

When I finally came to terms with what the essence of righteousness is. God’s righteousness means that god has a right assessment of His own worth; a proper affection for His ultimate value and thus He brings all His actions into conformity to this right judgment of Himself. “For the sake of your name” became my confidence for all my prayers.

Future Grace; January of 1996

The purifying power of living by faith in future grace. What will break the power of besetting sins in our lives? Is it not a belief in His precious promises? Oh how the grace fell upon my soul as I trusted in His Word! Oh, how the pursuit of holiness was empowered when I read this book!

God's Passion for His Glory; September of 1998

How living the vision of God's passion for His glory penetrates all of life. The end for which God created and redeemed the world is to put Himself on display by changing the hearts of his people so that they will seek their joy in the holy joy of God.

Closing thoughts

- ❖ There is no reality more breathtaking than God.
- ❖ Therefore, God's gladness is Himself.
- ❖ Consequently, our gladness is God and that gladness gives Him glory.
- ❖ Moreover, this gladness in God increases when we praise His perfections and suffer for His people.

Conclusion

The reason why I exist, the reason why you exist, the reason why the Chapel exists is to realize God, relish his grace & reflect His glory.