

The Pleasure of God

Finding Grace in the Ordinary

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CHAPTER 1



THE PLEASURE OF GOD: A WAY OF LIFE

For some years before the followers of Jesus were called Christians, they were known as “the people of the Way.” This was true both within the community of believers and among those who opposed and persecuted them. Even after the author of the book of Acts says that “they were first called Christians at Antioch,” he continues to refer to the believers by what was obviously the most common title at the time: “people of the Way.” Many biblical translations now capitalize *Way* to indicate that it is indeed a name and not just a description.

Nevertheless, one of the loveliest things about this name is that it is also a description. It reminds us that when Jesus called disciples, it was with the simple, straightforward invitation, “Follow me.” This infers a commitment that results in an action and then in a way of life. The first believers knew that to join this company of Jesus was more than affiliating with an organization and more even than accepting a body of beliefs — what we today call doctrines.

Indeed, at that time, the doctrinal verities were still being spelled out in the teaching of the apostles and recorded in apostolic letters, especially those by Paul. Those persons who made up the company of believers after the crucifixion and resurrection had heard a call to follow—not in the physical fashion of the original disciples, who left homes and jobs to accompany Jesus on his travels, but with the same deep sense of reality and decision. And they knew that in following Jesus they were choosing not only a Savior and a belief but something utterly different from the myriad of religions and philosophies that were then being practiced in the Roman Empire and beyond. They were choosing a way of life.

This way of life was not an escape from the world but a way of living within it. It affirmed the world as a residence, though not the end of it all. It insisted that this world was a place of divine purpose and that those who chose this way were declaring their commitment to bring that purpose to pass. The prayer that Jesus gave his followers declared as much. The prayer was short, down to earth, and very much to the point. After identifying God as Father in heaven and hallowing the name, the prayer moved to petitions—particularly, and before anything else, that God’s kingdom should come and God’s will be done on earth as in heaven. And lest one think that the prayer had to do with matters particularly heavenly, it moved immediately to the most basic of matters: a petition for daily bread. Then it included an appeal that God would forgive our sins, just as we would forgive others. This request is as essential to our spiritual and emotional health as bread is to our physical existence, because it deals with our three basic relationships with: God, our fellow humans, and our own souls. The final petition is a basic matter of daily life: an appeal for God’s help in resisting temptation. After all, if we give in to temptation, we’ll lose the Way.

This Way leads to heaven, an eternal reunion of humanity with our Creator and Lord. But it has much more to say about our relatively short journey on this earth than about eternity in heaven. Sometimes the earnest preacher or believer asks, “Suppose I die tomorrow—what then?” Here’s a better question: “Suppose I live tomorrow—what then?”

I’m not playing down eternity. Quite the opposite; I’m saying that this life today is of a piece with eternity. When a clergyman came to visit Henry David Thoreau in the last days of Thoreau’s life and asked if there was any sense of what followed, Thoreau answered memorably, “One world at a time.” Our first-century faith ancestors didn’t distinguish the two worlds so sharply; they made themselves ready for the world to come by living with a grand sense of God’s presence and purposes in this present world. This was part of the way Jesus contrasted himself with the false shepherds: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The abundance Christ promised begins here—not in the measure of land possessed or honors won, but in those measures that are appropriate to creatures such as you and me, people blessed with the breath of eternity in our persons and spirits.

This brings us to the matter of the kind of people we are. Whatever might be said of our moments of ecstasy, profundity, or nobility, or those rare occasions when individuals seem to shape history, most of our time, whoever we are, is spent in common stuff. It’s easy to find the statistics about how we spend our time to be somewhat dispiriting. We spend fully a third of our lives sleeping. It’s even more than that during infancy and early childhood, but we spend nearly as much time in our adult lives sleeping or trying to sleep. And about work: the standard in America is the forty-hour workweek. But an increasing percentage of people are working more (sometimes much more) than

forty hours a week, some because they love the work they do and some because they need overtime or a second job in order to meet their financial obligations.

And then there's more of the common stuff: eating or preparing food, or waiting for it in a restaurant or in our cars outside a fast-food establishment; waiting for traffic to move; standing in line at a checkout counter or for admission to an entertainment or sporting event; bathing, brushing and flossing teeth, shaving, caring for hair or the lack thereof, dressing, and making decisions about what to wear. And, of course, there are the elephants in the room of time consumption: television, the Internet, and the ubiquitous phone that is almost an extension of the hand if not the ear. So it is that our sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety years go by in common ways, and we hardly know where they've gone.

Is there a glory in all of this? Is this all there is to life? Where is the abundance of which Jesus spoke? Where is there greatness in the commonness of most of life?

There is a beautiful line in *Chariots of Fire*, a movie that won a host of awards in 1981 and 1982. The movie was based on events surrounding the 1924 Olympics, particularly involving two admirable figures. Harold Abrahams hoped to make a statement for his people, the Jews, and Eric Liddell planned to be a missionary to China like his parents. (The real Liddell did, in fact, die there in 1945 for his faith as a prisoner of war.)

Early in the story, Liddell's sister, Jenny, worries that her brother is putting his running ahead of his calling as a missionary. Liddell assures his sister that he is as committed as ever to his missionary vocation and then continues, "I believe that God made me for a purpose. But he also made me *fast*, and when I run I feel his pleasure."

The line was probably written by the screenwriter, as it doesn't appear in Liddell's biography. But it gets to the point of Eric Liddell's life. As Catherine Swift says in her

biography, Liddell's faith was something "he had lived . . . all his life. It was as natural as eating, bathing, sleeping, and breathing."¹

This is the way of saints, who find the stuff of life in its common hours. How else, when most of our hours are common? I cherish daily prayers, daily Bible reading, and using my time and resources in the service of Christ. As a pastor and teacher, I have encouraged others to practice such disciplines as well. But I'm uneasy with measuring Christianity by statistics as we do with sports, business, and politics. We must not tally verses read as we do home runs or contracts signed. Saints are not those who offer many prayers, but those who turn all of life into a prayer.

G. K. Chesterton, that remarkable Catholic journalist, critic, novelist, and man-about-town, put it well:

You say grace before meals.

All right.

But I say grace before the play and the opera,

And grace before I open a book,

And grace before sketching, painting,

Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing,

And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.²

The saint is someone who whether walking, eating, resting, emailing, laughing, or socializing does it with such gladness of soul as to say, "God made me thus, and when I so live, *I feel his pleasure.*" It follows that anything which cannot be lived with such holy gladness should not be part of one's life.

Does it seem presumptuous, indeed arrogant, to think that what we do with our ordinary lives might give pleasure to God? To the contrary, it adds beauty to the love of God that God would be so attentive as to care about our daily lives.

And it redefines *ordinary*. How can anything be ordinary if we find the glory of God there? How so, if in it we feel God's pleasure?



DAILY PROMISE

Today I will see the uncommon potential in all the ordinary elements of this day. I intend to feel God's pleasure in all that I do.

CHAPTER 2



EATING

Our culture sees eating as one of life's secular activities. On the most basic level, eating is necessary for survival. It's the crumb of bread or the handful of rice that keeps us alive. Nevertheless, it is also the key element of those occasions when we want to celebrate. Whether it is coffee and a pastry with a friend, hors d'oeuvres at a reception, or cake at a birthday or wedding, food is the essence of celebration. Yet it is so much the stuff of daily life that we measure it statistically: number of calories consumed, cost plus tip for the server, how many to be invited for dinner, or the amount we can save by clipping coupons from the Sunday paper.

At least once a year, at Thanksgiving, even our secular culture acknowledges God's relationship to food. So, too at those public dinners a formal prayer is deemed proper. Much of the time, however, the attitude of our world about God and mealtime is conveyed in the mood of the iconic Norman Rockwell painting of a grandmother and grandson with heads bowed in a New England diner, while those

at nearby tables look on with expressions that convey embarrassment, curiosity, and admiration.

The Bible sees eating as the good gift of God, one of the favors by which the Creator has blessed his creation.

Jesus enjoyed eating, and others enjoyed eating with him. His enemies accused him of being a winebibber and a glutton. We have no evidence that he was ever intoxicated or that he was guilty of overeating. Perhaps his enemies attached those labels out of jealousy of his popularity, but I wonder if it is also because they envied the obvious pleasure Jesus found at the table. For him, eating was more than a means of staying alive and more even than a conventional opportunity for celebration; it was part of the pleasure of meeting in the presence of the Father. To fast for forty days not only cut our Lord off from daily sustenance but also took away the joy associated with eating.

A seriously abstemious soul might remind me that it was by eating that our spiritual ancestors in Eden got into trouble and that when our race got a second chance via Noah, Noah himself upset things again by overdrinking. Obviously, there's a point to be made. At the least, it shows our inclination to pervert life's loveliest favors so that they become instruments of destruction—of both ourselves and others.

But see how the Bible portrays food as a gift of God, not only for sustenance and necessity but also for celebration. "See," God says, "I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (Gen. 1:29). The presence of seed within the plant and its fruit tells us that the system is structured to continue replicating itself for as long as we cooperate with its doing so. The variety of these fruits and plants is probably beyond our numbering, and I venture that we will keep adding to the list as we continue discovering the wealth of our creation. It's appropriate that this sentence about food is the last

word of the creation story, other than the Creator's obvious pleasure in the perfection of the finished product. Then comes the first Sabbath, a day of rest and celebration.

The biblical drama takes its sharpest turn in the call of Abraham and Sarah, so all that follows, including the New Testament story, unfolds from that call. When the story seems close to a morass, an angelic team visits Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre. In classic understatement, Abraham asks, "Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves." By "little bread" he really means "choice flour," "a calf, tender and good," and "curds and milk," which his guests eat while Abraham stands at a tree nearby as if he were the waiter in a restaurant whose solitary obligation was to watch over one table (Gen. 18:1-8). It is in this setting that God confides to Abraham a message of miracle and of judgment. The Genesis writer makes clear that the meal provides the setting for such a discussion. Every business luncheon since has been a fumbling imitation of that hour.

The story of Israel's years in the wilderness is a spiritual idyll with one continuing motif: daily bread. Manna. The same every morning, yet new every morning. Certainty, but no surprises. Adequate, but predictable. For many of us, all our meals become like manna: there, predictable, meeting our needs, but without a true sense of celebration. So it is with the stomach that receives the food. The specialist knows that the stomach is a wonderfully intricate machine, but it is only fully appreciated when it fails to function in its taken-for-granted way. Otherwise, the stomach seems quite ordinary.

The Old Testament calendar insisted on more. There were special days in the Hebrew calendar; all of them were religious days, and all but one were feast days. The inference was clear for those who would see it. God found pleasure in the feasting of his people. As one who has been privileged to live in several cities with a sizable Jewish population, I submit that the Jewish delicatessen is a vestigial reminder

that God's people find pleasure in eating. The spiritual quality may no longer be prominent, but the taste and the serving size are physical evidence of a holy joy.

So Jesus ate. He showed his divinity in the midst of his humanity. He ate with publicans and sinners, who by practice were a raucous crowd. His disciples plucked and ate grain as they walked on the Sabbath, to the distress of strict religious legalists. Jesus ate at the home of his dear friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. When a crowd stayed long while listening to his teaching, Jesus told his disciples, "Give them something to eat." He made a miracle of the meal, with such abundance that there were twelve baskets of leftovers. God's pleasure at that mealtime was opulent. As for the day when our world will stand at Jesus' judgment seat, Jesus said that a key test will be this: "I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat," or "I was hungry, and you gave me no food" (Matt. 25:35–42). That seems a very pragmatic standard of judgment and not an obviously pious one unless we believe that God not only wants our spiritual needs to be supplied but also finds pleasure in the satisfying of our most elementary (and alimentary) needs.

So how ought we to eat? Certainly, to recognize that food is one of the few utter essentials of life. If God prizes our continued existence, then food is essential, and God finds pleasure at the least in our survival. But the variety God has provided seems also to say that God has built aesthetics into food. What is so beautiful as a tomato bursting with ripeness in a backyard garden, or a melon cleaved for sale in a supermarket? Such beauty should be eaten with care.

There also should be emotion with food. "Bread I broke with you," the poet says in sad reminiscing, "was more than bread."¹ Nehemiah was a tough-minded preacher-administrator, but he also had a proper theology of food. As he called for a return to God, he interrupted the people's mourning and weeping. "Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet" (Neh. 8:9–10), he admonished the people. Enjoy!

And give food proper attention. It's blasphemous to shovel in food as if we were stoking a furnace. We eat less when we taste more. Joshua Sundquist remembers a day when he was settling in, as was his custom, to multitask, eating a favorite salad while handling email and telephone messages. Then he realized that though he was eating his salad, he wasn't tasting it—not the lime dressing, not the chicken, not the tasty parmesan.²

To eat in God's presence is also to eat with a conscience. The supreme wickedness of a certain rich man was that "he feasted sumptuously every day" while a beggar neighbor longed for a few crumbs (Luke 16:19–31). If table graces throughout the centuries remind us to be mindful of those who have not, instead of settling for the words, we should receive an offering for a poverty food program as soon as the meal is completed—even if it is simply a family gathering.

And we should know how to rejoice in what we have. That remarkable sixteenth-century nun Teresa of Avila one day received a partridge from a generous friend. As she was eating it with pleasure, someone reprimanded her. Teresa replied, "There is a time for partridge and a time for penance."³

If we eat as God would have us eat, God will find pleasure in our eating. The Giver will rejoice in the good taste of the receiver.



DAILY PROMISE

Today I will treat my eating as a sacrament.
Whether alone or in a noisy public place, whether
the usual fare or something out of the ordinary,
I will savor it with uncommon appreciation.
