

# The Pleasure of God in Obedience

*Obedience is the irrepressible public relations project of those who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.*

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to harken than the fat of rams.

1 Samuel 15:22

God is a mountain spring and not a watering trough. He is self-replenishing, and does not need a bucket brigade to meet his needs. We do not serve him, therefore, as though he needed anything (Acts 17:25). Rather we honour his overflowing fullness when we thrive on the water of Life. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. This means that whenever I am most thirsty and desperate for help, I can encourage my soul not only with the truth that there is a merciful impulse in the heart of God, but also with the truth that the source and power of that impulse is the zeal of God to act for the glory of his own name. "For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great" Psalm 25:11. When we hope in God, we glorify God as the fountain of deep and lasting joy. And when we pray, we give expression to that God-glorifying hope.

Going one step further, it is *obedience* to God that makes this God-glorifying hope



# BE Still.

## THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION

visible and proves that it is real in our lives. Obedience is the irrepressible public relations project of those who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good (Matthew 5:16).

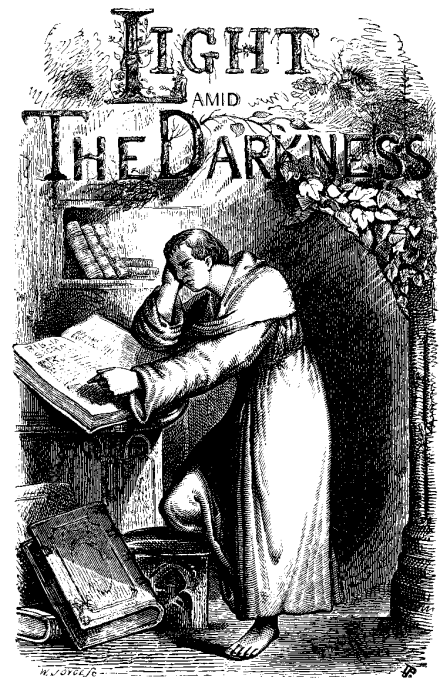
### *Two Key Questions*

We begin with Samuel's words to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD?" The answer is clearly no.

Question One is "Why does God delight in obedience?" and Two, 'Is this good news? Is it good news to hear that what pleases God is obedience, or is it a discouraging burden? Many hear the biblical call for obedience as something very different from the gospel. They hear the ominous tones of legalism and insecurity and make every effort to keep the call for faith and the call for obedience in radically separate categories to keep salvation by faith from being contaminated by 'works'.

Before we focus on these two questions, let's be sure we have the setting of 1 Samuel 15 clear in our minds. When Israel passed through the wilderness, the Amalekites attacked them (Exodus 17:8-16). God gave the Israelites victory, but this wicked mistreatment was never forgotten. In Deuteronomy, God said, "When God has given you rest from all your enemies... you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget."

Finally, the time appointed for judgment comes and the Lord commands Saul, the first king of Israel, to execute this sentence. Saul gathers his army and destroys the Amalekites, but spares King Agag and the best of the sheep and oxen. The Lord repents that he has made Saul king and this makes Samuel angry with God's attitude. Samuel cries out to God all night (1 Samuel 15:11). The result of this night of prayer is a firm resolve to do what God says. He rises early in the morning and finds out that Saul has gone to Carmel, set up a monument for himself and proceeded to Gilgal where he was first made king. So Samuel goes to meet Saul, and is met with



LUTHER FINDING THE BIBLE.

*"O my God, never let me walk even in the green pastures without Thee!"*

"THE LORD IS MY PORTION, SAITH MY SOUL." LAM. 3:24

the ingratiating words, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord." Samuel asks what the sound of bleating sheep and lowing oxen means if Saul really destroyed everything the way God said. But Saul blames it on the people: "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep..." But nothing Saul says will work now. He has disobeyed the commandment of the Lord and he finally admits it in verse 24: "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words."

### *Why God Delights in Obedience*

**First, God has pleasure in obedience, because disobedience shows a misplacement of fear.** Saul goes on to say that he disobeyed because "I feared the people and obeyed their voice." Saul obeyed the people because he feared them instead of God. He feared the human consequences of obedience more than he feared the divine consequences of sin. He feared the displeasure of people more than the displeasure of God. And that is a great insult to God. Samuel had said twice to Saul and to the people, "Fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart" (1 Samuel 12:14, 24). But now the leader himself has feared man and turned away from following God.

It is a great biblical truth that to fear a thing is to do homage to it. In Isaiah 8:12-13 the prophet warns against the very mistake Saul made:

Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, *him you shall regard as holy*; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

**If our lives are guided by the same fears that unbelievers have, then we do not "regard God as holy."** We do not honour and revere him as greater than all things. Isaiah says it is a kind of pride to be afraid of what man can do while we disregard the promises of God. "Who do you think you are to fear man and forget me your Maker!" The apostle Peter says: "If you suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord" (1 Peter 3:14-15). The point is this: if you have begun to fear man, you have begun to deny the holiness, the worth, of God and his Son Jesus. God is infinitely stronger, wiser and more full of reward and joy. To turn from him is to discount all that God promises to be for those who fear him. In such an insult God takes no pleasure. On the other hand, when we hear the promises and trust him with courage, fearing the reproach brought upon God by our unbelief, then he is greatly honoured. And in that he has pleasure.

**Second, God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience shows a misplacement of pleasure.** Saul tried to persuade Samuel that it was his noble intention of sacrificing the animals to the Lord that led him to disobey God. But the Lord had given Samuel insight into the true motive of Saul and the people. Samuel says they *swooped down* on the spoil like hungry birds eager to fill their bellies. He

implies that the people were driven by an overwhelming desire for the pleasures of all that meat. Their pleasure was misplaced. It should have been in God. They delighted more in the meat than they did in the smile and fellowship of God. This is a great insult to God. But to delight more in God's promises and his awesome presence than in the fleeting pleasures of disobedience is a great honour to God. And in that he has pleasure.

**Third, God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience shows a misplacement of praise.** After Saul defeated the Amalekites, the first thing he did was build a monument *for himself*. He misplaced praise from God to himself.

Earlier in 1 Samuel 19:21, Saul had seemed amazed that God would choose him to be king over Israel even though he was from the smallest family of the smallest tribe of Israel. And he should have been amazed! Samuel asked him why he was driven by a lust for human glory when God had given him such a glorious privilege as the anointed king of God's people. But Saul was not content with the glory of God and the honour of being chosen king. He wanted his own glory and praise. And the submissive path of obedience to God does not offer that kind of praise and glory.

## *The essence of faith is being satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ.*

**Fourth, God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience is "as the sin of divination".** This is the very reason Samuel gives. In Deuteronomy God puts divination in the same list as child sacrifice.

Why are rebellion and disobedience like the sin of divination? Divination is seeking to know what to do in a way that ignores the Word and counsel of God. It regards the guidance and revelation of God as wrong or insufficient. And this is exactly what disobedience is based on.

**Fifth, God has pleasure in obedience because disobedience is idolatry.** Samuel goes on to say that *stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry*. When God says one thing and we consult the little wizard of our own wisdom and then stubbornly choose to go our own way, we are, in effect, idolaters. We go beyond *consulting* ourselves for wisdom and actually *esteem* the direction of our own mind over God's direction, and become guilty of idolatry. Worst of all, the idol is our own self.

So it stands to reason that God will be displeased with disobedience because at every point it is an attack on his glory. It puts the fear of man in the place of the fear of God. It elevates pleasure in things above pleasure in God. It seeks a name for itself instead of a name for God. It seeks out additional guidance besides God's, instead of resting in the wisdom

of God. And it sets more value on the dictates of self than on the dictates of God and thus attempts to dethrone God by giving allegiance to the idol of the human will.

But obedience, being the exact opposite, in all these things enthrones and honours God. Therefore God has great pleasure in obedience. He beams like any father would when his children are courageous because they know their daddy's strong arm is behind them. He takes pleasure in us when our obedience shows that we put our treasure in him and not the enticements of sin. He delights in the meekness and humility of our submission that loves to make a name for God and not man. He rejoices over the resting of our souls in the sufficiency of his wisdom. And he exults over us with singing when we enthrone his will as more precious than all the ways of the world.

### *But is this Good News?*

God takes great pleasure in obedience, but can we? Is it good news to hear that God is pleased with obedience, or is this a burden we thought we had escaped when we heard the gospel of forgiveness and justification by faith? I believe that it is good news that God delights in obedience. There are at least four reasons.

**First, God's pleasure in obedience is good news because it means he is praiseworthy and reliable.** If God did not delight in obedience he would be a living contradiction. He would love his glory above all things and yet not take pleasure in the acts that make his glory known. He would, in effect, be two-faced and double-tongued. His beauty would vanish, and with it all our happy praise! An he would be unreliable because you can't trust a God whose values are so fickle that he exalts himself one minute and approves of insults the next. If God is praiseworthy and reliable he must exult in the tribute of obedience. **And there is no greater news than the assurance that God is worthy of praise and worthy of trust.**

**Second, God's pleasure in obedience is good news because everything God commands is for our good.** Jesus is the great physician, not the great dictator. Jesus does dictate and command, but all his commands are like a doctor's prescription or therapy. They are not arbitrary. They are meant to make us well and happy. If they have some painful side effects, that is not because the doctor is unkind or unwise. It is because the disease is so bad that severe medicines may be required.

But not only are the commands of *Jesus* for our good; so were *all* the commandments of the law in the Old Testament for the good of Israel. They were not a cruel burden. They were the loving guidelines of an infinitely wise heavenly Father for the good of his people (Deuteronomy 6:24, 10:12-13).

**Third, God's pleasure in obedience is good news because his commandments are not too hard for us.** Moses said it very clearly in Deuteronomy 30:11, "This commandment which I command you this day is *not too hard for you*." The Old Testament law was not the kind of arrangement where God stood over his

people with a scowl and a club waiting for someone to make a tiny slip. At the very birthplace of the law on Mount Sinai, the Law-Giver identified himself like this: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exodus 34:6-7). The law had an elaborate provision for forgiveness and restoration rooted in the heart of God. So the law as a whole could be fulfilled even by those who needed repeated forgiveness. It is not an all-or-nothing demand for perfection. Therefore it is "not too hard for you."

Jesus put it this way, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). This does not mean there is no yoke and no burden. It means there is something about Jesus that makes his demands (even when they sever us from home and wealth and life itself) "light" and "easy." The apostle John found this to be true in practice for many decades, and then wrote, "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

God's pleasure in obedience is not like the sadistic pleasure of a heartless coach who likes to see his recruits sweat and strain under impossible conditioning exercises. In fact he pronounces a curse on such moral taskmasters: "Woe to you teachers of the law! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke 11:46). God is not like that. With every command, he lifts not just his finger, but all his precious promises and all his omnipotent power and puts them at the service of his child. "No eye has seen a God besides you, who works for those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4). His commands are only as hard to obey as his promises are hard to believe. This leads us to the fourth reason God's pleasure in obedience is good news.

**Fourth, God's pleasure in obedience is good news because the obedience he loves is the obedience of faith.** This concept is so widely misunderstood today that some people cannot see how faith and obedience are necessarily connected as root and branch. So you often find in many ministries the cultivation of an implicit two-stage Christianity: a faith stage and then (maybe) an obedience stage. But this is not the way the Bible pictures the life of faith. The separation of faith and obedience, as though faith were necessary for salvation and obedience were optional, is a mistake owing to a misunderstanding of what faith really is. True saving faith is not the kind of belief in the facts of the gospel that leaves the heart and life unchanged. If it were, then God's pleasure in obedience would indeed be bad news. He would be saying that we are saved by faith, and then, to please him with obedience, we must move beyond faith to something else in order to

produce good behaviour. This is not good news. The good news is that saving faith is by its nature a life-changing power.

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### *Obedience is the Fruit of Faith*

Saving faith has an intrinsic power to produce fruit. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." Faith works through love. If it doesn't, it is dead and cannot save. As James 2:17 says, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." **The good news is not that obedience is not crucial, but that faith is the only way to obey, and this obedience of faith is the only kind God approves** (see Romans 1:5 and 14:23).

It is a great irony that the people who cultivate a two-stage Christianity do so in the name of grace, but in effect nullify grace. They say there is a faith stage necessary for getting to heaven, and then an obedience stage not necessary for getting to heaven (but perhaps for getting better rewards there). This looks like grace because they say obedience is not mandatory. But in fact the whole Christian life is gradually transformed into an experience of something other than a life lived by faith. Having cut the root of faith away from obedience to make

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## *Faith is the quenching of the soul's thirst at the fountain of God.*

obedience optional and exalt grace, in effect they define the life of obedience as a life of works which we are to produce not by the effectual power of saving faith, but by some other kind of effort. But this effort to obey by some other power than faith is not an event of grace.

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### *Grace is Power, Not Just Pardon*

Underlying this mistake is a misunderstanding of grace. Grace is not simple leniency when we have sinned. Grace is the enabling gift of God not to sin. Grace is power, not just pardon. This is plain, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:10. Paul describes grace as the enabling power of his work: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me did not prove vain; but I laboured harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God which is with me." Grace is not simply the pardon of Paul's sins. It is the power to press on in obedience. Therefore, the effort we make to obey God is not an effort done in our own strength, but "in the strength which God supplies, that in everything God may get the glory" (1 Peter 4:11). And doing something by relying on the strength which God supplies means doing it by faith. Therefore the obedience which gives God pleasure is by grace through faith. It is the obedience of faith. Paul confirms this in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

by calling our acts of goodness "works of faith" and by saying that the glory this brings to Jesus is "according to the grace of God" because it happens "by [his] power." The obedience that gives God pleasure is produced by the power of God's grace through faith.

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### *Saved Through Sanctification*

The same dynamic is at work at every stage of the Christian life. The power of God's grace that *saves through faith* is the same power of God's grace that *sanctifies through faith*. Salvation is the big biblical term that describes all God's saving work for us and in us, past, present and future. Salvation is not one stage in the Christian life. It is the Christian life. And sanctification is one essential part of it. So Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, "We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." Notice two things. We are not saved apart from sanctification, and this process of salvation through sanctification happens "through belief in the truth." That is, sanctification is by faith. Or to put it most plainly, the obedience which pleases God is the obedience of faith, and the obedience of faith is an essential part of salvation.

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### *But How Does Faith Produce Obedience?*

When you trust Christ to take care of your future ("faith is the assurance of things hoped for"), the inevitable result is that sinful strategies to gain happiness sink in the peaceful confidence that God will make a greater joy for you in his own way. Therefore moral conformity to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) is the fruit of faith.

Martin Luther saw this so clearly! In the two years between October 1518 and 1520 the indomitable reformer had a respite from the Roman siege. He worked feverishly, not knowing how long his safety would last. One of his works that came from this period was the walloping little pamphlet called *The Freedom of a Christian*. Even in translation, and four centuries later, it vibrates with the passion of this ignited man. It captures (or should I say releases!) the connection between faith and holiness—between confidence in the promises of Christ and conformity to the person of Christ. Luther wrote,

It is a further function of faith that it honours him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard, since it considers him truthful and trustworthy... So when the soul firmly trusts God's promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous... When this is done, the soul consents to his will. Then it hallows his name and allows itself to be treated according to God's good pleasure for, clinging to God's promises, it does not doubt that he who is true, just, and wise will do, dispose, and provide all things well. Is not such a soul most obedient to God in all things by this faith? What commandment is there that obedience

has not completely fulfilled?... This obedience, however, is not rendered by works, but by faith alone.

We should never think of obedience as something unattached to saving faith as though the one could exist for long without the other. Obedience to Christ is the necessary result of true faith.

But to make crystal clear why is it that faith begets obedience, or practical likeness to Christ, we should draw out the essential meaning of saving faith even more clearly than we have so far. We will see in a moment from Hebrews that the *future* dimension of saving faith is essential if faith is to have its sanctifying effect. Trusting in God to meet our needs breaks the power of sin's promise to make us happier. But what we need to see here is that *the essence of faith is being satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ*.

This statement emphasises two things. One is the God-centredness of faith. It is not merely the *promises* of God that satisfy us. It is all that *God himself* is for us. Faith embraces God—not just his promised gifts—as our treasure. Faith banks its hope not just on the real estate of the age to come, but on the fact that *God* will be there (Revelation 21:3). And even *now* what faith embraces most earnestly is not just the reality of sins forgiven (as precious as that is) but the presence of the living Christ is our hearts and the fullness of God himself (Ephesians 3:17-19).

The other thing emphasised in defining faith as *being satisfied with all that God is for us* is the term “satisfaction.” Faith is not just believing facts about God. It is not just intellectual assent. Faith is the quenching of the soul's thirst at the fountain of God. The biblical evidence for this can be seen most easily in John 6:35. “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.’” “Believing” means “coming” to Jesus to eat and drink the “bread of life” and the “living water” (John 4:10, 14) which are nothing other than Jesus himself. And when we eat this food and drink this water we are satisfied with Jesus. That is the meaning of faith. We rest in him. Here is the secret of the power of faith to break the enslaving force of sinful attractions. **If the heart is satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus, the power of sin to lure us away from the wisdom of Christ is broken.** And we will love holiness because it is

an expression of the personality of the One who brings us so much satisfaction.

### *The Source of Moses' Obedience*

The writer to the Hebrews works this out for us in some practical illustrations. For example, he shows that Moses's obedience and love was produced by this kind of faith.

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. he considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. (Hebrews 11:24-26)

The key to the triumph of obedience over disobedience is confidence that what Christ offers is better than the “fleeting pleasures of sin.” Moses looked to the reward of God's promises, he weighed that against the rewards of unrighteousness, and he rested satisfied in God. With that, the power of sin was broken and he was freed to love a rebellious people for forty years. The writer of Hebrews calls this liberating contentment “faith.”

The definition of faith behind this usage is given in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” In other words, faith is the satisfied assurance that God will work things out in the future far better than I could work them out by relying on myself or by departing from the path of obedience—even if obedience means suffering now. Being satisfied with all that God is for me in Christ—past, present and future—is the power to resist the alluring temptations of disobedience.

### *The Power to be Plundered in Love and Joy*

The writer to the Hebrews gives another, even more graphic illustration of the way faith produces obedience. He tells the story of how in the early days of their faith the Christians showed great love to the imprisoned saints by visiting them at great cost to themselves. What was the powerful source of this obedience to the command to “remember those who are in prison” (Hebrews 13:3)?

Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings sometimes being publicly exposed to

abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and *you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*. Therefore do not throw away your confidence which has great reward. (Hebrews 10:32-36)

In these Christians' lives, the power to love was the confidence that God would take care of their future. So their obedience was the obedience of faith. The cost of obedience—which was immense—was not so great as the offsetting promise of God. The assurance of things hoped for was the source of the obedience of love. This is what Paul meant in Galatians 5:6 when he said, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working through love*.” Faith works through love because faith is satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ, and so faith breaks the alluring power of selfish temptations. This stress on satisfaction shows the secret of the psychological dynamics of why faith produces obedience. When we are satisfied with our counsellor we will do what he counsels. But more than that. True faith delights in all that Jesus is—his character, his personality, his nature. This means that his counsel itself will be beautiful to us. We will love his holiness because it is an expression of the personality of the One whose personality we cherish.

### *We Are His Pleasure When He Is Our Treasure*

The point I have been labouring to clarify here is that God's pleasure in obedience that pleases him is the obedience of *faith*. Another way to put it would be to say that God is happy with our obedience when our obedience is the overflow of our happiness with God. God is delighted with our obedience when it is the fruit of our delight in him. Our obedience is God's pleasure when it proves that God is our treasure. This is good news, because it means very simply that the command to obey is the command to be happy in God. The commandments of God are only as hard to obey as the promises of God are hard to believe. The Word of God is only as hard to obey as the beauty of God is hard to cherish.

*Abridged from THE PLEASURES OF GOD by John Piper*

**B**e encouraged! The whole world, in fact the whole creation, with its sights and sounds, colours and shades, good and evil, angels and demons, principalities and powers, and all the joys and pains, trials and hopes you experience, as well as the infinite resources of your heavenly Father, are being employed for one thing... the testing of your faith. The whole creation groans for the final day and the revealing of the sons of God... all for your Father's ultimate glory.

And his glory hinges upon how you go through an ordinary day: your thoughts, your prayers, your attitude, your obedience. It's all crucial, it's all significant. Just remember you are never alone. By your choices of faith you have more opportunity to glorify God on earth than angels do in heaven. Everything counts. Make the ordinary extraordinary. EW

*“The depth of the Son's suffering was the measure of his love for the Father's glory. Every footfall on the way to Calvary echoed through the universe with this message: “The glory of God is of infinite value. The glory of God is of infinite value.”*