

“SURPRISED BY JOY”:
JOY IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
AND IN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

DAVID M. HOWARD, JR.*

Fellow members of the ETS and friends: I stand before you tonight for the first time unfettered by the constraints of speaking officially, whether as a study-group chair, the Society’s program chair, as moderator of a business meeting, or as a spokesman for the Executive Committee. I stand before you tonight to speak on my own behalf and, I hope, also on the Lord’s behalf.

I think back to my first ETS meeting in 1981 in Toronto. I attended this same banquet, and I watched and listened with awe to the presidential address by Kenneth Barker that year, on “False Dichotomies Between the Testaments.”¹ I had absolutely no thought that I would ever be standing before the Society in the same capacity. It is a high honor that you have bestowed on me, and I am humbled and grateful.

Despite the high honor, however, when I have thought about this night over the past year, usually it has been with a sense of great dread. This is because of the membership challenge concerning open theism and inerrancy that lay before us, which we finally brought to a conclusion last night.² I did not know how that evening would turn out, but God did. My sense is that, for most of us, a certain justice was achieved, and the Society has come through this challenge the better for it.

So, by his grace, I stand before you this night, not with the dread of this past year, but with great joy. I rejoice in the opportunity we enjoy tonight: to fellowship together and to be reminded of the need for joy in our lives. I rejoice in the 55-year history of the ETS and the 26 years I have been a member. I rejoice in the growth of the Society, especially in recent years.³ I rejoice in the spirit in which most things have taken place over the years, including the difficult events of this past year.

I want to speak to you tonight about the joy that is incumbent upon all of us as Christians and as scholars. But, beyond the speaking, I want us to

* David M. Howard, Jr., professor of Old Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary, 3949 Bethel Drive, St. Paul, MN 55112, delivered this presidential address at the 55th annual meeting of the ETS on November 20, 2003 in Atlanta, GA.

¹ *JETS* 25 (1982) 3–16. This was a remarkable topic, coming from a dispensationalist. In my (obviously flawed) memory over the years, I’d remembered the title as “Legitimate Continuities Between the Testaments,” which is actually not that far from the main thrust of Ken’s address.

² The results of this special business meeting of the Society may be found in this issue of the *Journal*.

³ There were 300 in attendance at my first ETS meeting in Toronto, and, this year, there are 2400.

participate in a sensory experience. I mean that we should use every sense and every faculty possible as we consider joy. I want us to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps 34:8).⁴ Our scholarship is not done—at least it *should* not be done—in a vacuum, in a musty study with no connection to the world around us. Ultimately, our scholarship should be done in a doxological context: it needs to be done to the praise and glory of God.

So tonight we will do something that we have never done before at an ETS banquet, namely, we will sing together. It is my deep conviction that theology is ultimately doxological. So, in addition to working with and on a text, we also must let the text speak to us, inform us, transform us, wash over us, renew us. One way to express this is through song, and so, at two points in my address, I will ask you to join me in singing reverent and joyful praises to God.

Before I begin, I want to thank and acknowledge several people. First and foremost is my wife Jan, who is here tonight. She has been a supportive observer of my participation in the ETS since 1981, and she is delighted finally to be able to come and see first hand what we do here. My father, David Howard, Sr., is also here. He was a student of two of our illustrious predecessors, Merrill C. Tenney and Kenneth S. Kantzer, and has spent a lifetime of service in missions work. Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank my provost at Bethel Seminary, Leland Eliason. Leland has been very encouraging and affirming to me this year in a variety of ways. He also has performed a great service to the Society in releasing me from some course duties, which has allowed me to give the time needed to the recent membership challenge.

Finally, today is November 20, 2003, which would have been my mother’s 77th birthday. She was eagerly looking forward to being here tonight, but she passed away two months ago. And so this address is dedicated to the memory of Phyllis Howard and to the faithful service that she rendered on behalf of the cause of Christ. It was at her knee and by her side that I first learned about him whom we all serve.⁵

I. C. S. LEWIS AND *SURPRISED BY JOY*

In his book *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*,⁶ C. S. Lewis tells the story of his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. It is a very moving book, in which we see the constant interplay between Lewis’s intuition and experience, on the one hand, and his reason and intellect, on the other. While there are many components in this work that I have found myself marking, underlining, and coming back to again and again—countless nuggets of wisdom, in and of themselves—my interest in the book here lies in its central narrative describing Lewis’s experience of—and, at the same time, his con-

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

⁵ Some brief materials on Phyllis Howard’s life and impact may be read at my website: www.bethel.edu/~dhoward.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955).

stant search for—what he calls “Joy” (the word is capitalized in his usage). And, the book has a surprise ending, where Lewis discovers that what he was searching for was not “Joy” at all.

Lewis is not attempting a technical study of joy in the biblical sense, either in the OT or the NT. Nevertheless, at its core, his use of “Joy” is indeed deeply biblical. The Bible uses a great constellation of words by which to express joy. In the OT, the primary terms are גִּיל (*gyl*: “rejoice”), שִׂמְחָה (*śmḥ* “be glad, rejoice”), נִגַּן (“shout for joy”).⁷ In the NT, the most prominent terms are ἀγαλλιάομαι (*agalliaomai*: “exult, shout for joy, rejoice greatly”), εὐφραίνω (*euphrainō*: “gladden, cheer [up]”), and especially χαίρω (*chairō*: “be glad, rejoice”).⁸ There is a great array of reasons for this rejoicing, all of them oriented to God himself. He is the Object who draws out the joy from his followers.

For Lewis, the essential component of “Joy” is a *deep-seated longing for something that is supremely desirable*. As a child, he had early glimpses of this in fleeting experiences that overwhelmed him in a rush, then just as quickly vanished.⁹ His mind and eyes were opened, by different stimuli, to things in another dimension, beyond this world. But, just as quickly, he was brought back to the mundane “realities” around him. He defines “Joy,” then, as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”¹⁰ He sharply distinguishes “Joy” from happiness or pleasure, which are much more oriented to the immediate, to gratifications of various types, most of them instant, ephemeral, and, in the end, not satisfying over a long term. “Joy” only shares with them the fact that it is something intensely to be desired. He states that “I doubt whether anyone who has ever tasted [Joy] would ever, if both were within his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world.”¹¹ Further, “Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.”¹²

Lewis describes in this book, then, his search for “Joy.” The teasing glimpses of it that he experienced in early childhood, and then as a school-boy when he discovered the Norse gods, were gradually revealed to him in larger portions when he was a young adult as he was drawn closer and

⁷ The best tools for launching a study of semantic fields in Hebrew are (1) Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1981; 2d ed. 1990); and (2) Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). Both Even-Shoshan and *NIDOTTE* list synonyms in the semantic field for every lexeme, and *NIDOTTE* also includes a comprehensive list in its index volume (vol. 5).

⁸ The best tool for launching semantic-field work in Greek is Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989). In addition, one also can access much of this information in Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–1978).

⁹ *Ibid.* 15–17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 17–18.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 18.

¹² *Ibid.* 72. For Lewis, “Joy” was essentially what in German is called *Sehnsucht*, an ardent desire or wistful longing, sometimes with a hint of nostalgia.

closer to the true God who was the Source of this “Joy,” and, indeed, who was also its Object, as Lewis discovered. God was the Object toward which “Joy” was pointing.

Lewis endured a rather dreary childhood in many respects. His mother died when he was very young. He did not have a close relationship with his father, and he was sent off to two different boarding schools, where he was mostly miserable. He did, as he put it, “become an effective believer” in organized religion,¹³ and he “began seriously to pray and to read my Bible and attempt to obey my conscience,” but “[f]or many years Joy (as I have defined it) was not only absent but forgotten.”¹⁴ And, his being “an effective believer” was short-lived. In his early teens and at a new school, he writes, “I ceased to be a Christian.”¹⁵ This happened gradually: “little by little, with fluctuations which I cannot now trace, I became an apostate, dropping my faith with no sense of loss but with the greatest relief.”¹⁶

In what he describes as a “renaissance,” Lewis had a memorable encounter that changed his life up to that point. He encountered Norse mythology and the great pantheon of powerful Norse gods. The mystery, grandeur, and allure of what he called “the Northernness” engulfed him and set him on a new path, a new quest: to pursue the feelings that were elicited in him, as he puts it, by the “vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity.”¹⁷ This awakened the old longings for “Joy” that he’d had as a younger child. To “‘have it again’ was the supreme and only important object of desire,”¹⁸ remote as it might be. He read as much as he could of the Northern gods, and listened to their story told musically in Wagner’s majestic music of the *Ring* cycle. He related to these gods with “something very like adoration, some kind of quite disinterested self-abandonment to an object which securely claimed this by simply being the object it was.”¹⁹ But, he of course never actually believed in the *existence* of these gods, except as literary or mythological creations. The “Northernness” was “essentially a desire and implied the absence of its object.”²⁰ Essentially, it was simply a desire for its own sake. But, he reflects years later, looking back, that “[s]ometimes I can almost think that I was sent back to the false gods there to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself.”²¹

Lewis was sent off in his later teens to study with a tutor who prepared him well for his university studies at Oxford, and he remembers that “I was now happier than I had ever been,”²² for various reasons that need not de-

¹³ Ibid. 33.

¹⁴ Ibid. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid. 58.

¹⁶ Ibid. 66.

¹⁷ Ibid. 73.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 76–77.

²⁰ Ibid. 82.

²¹ Ibid. 77.

²² Ibid. 159.

tain us here. However, he gradually experienced a “fading of the Northernness,”²³ in which he experienced the old thrill less and less. Ironically, even though he had immersed himself in the Northernness—by study, by music—trying to experience “Joy” again and again, it rarely came to him. As he focused more and more on this, “Finally I woke from building the temple to find that the God had flown.”²⁴ He did not get the old thrill.

He did learn (by experience, apparently) that sexual desire and satisfaction did not bring “Joy”; it was pleasure. He writes, “Joy is not a substitute for sex; sex is very often a substitute for Joy. I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are not substitutes for Joy.”²⁵ And, during these years, he became a thoroughgoing rationalist whose world “was free from the Christian God.”²⁶

In his university years and afterwards, in his twenties, Lewis gradually was exposed to writers who opened his mind to the Transcendent again, and, in telling of this phase, Lewis titles one of his chapters “Check” (as in a chess game, signaling impending victory). He found that “Magic” in the works of Yeats and others was a great attraction, a possible source of “Joy,” but, in the end, he realized that it was just as irrelevant to “Joy” as Eros had been. He discovered the writings of George MacDonald, wherein he saw “Holiness,” which embodied “Joy” in some way. He writes that “never had the wind of Joy blowing through any story been less separable from the story itself.”²⁷ Lewis’s intellectual options gradually narrowed as he read and discussed; he found himself forced by the sheer logic in books he read and people with whom he associated to acknowledge the very real possibility of a God. He did not experience “Joy” very much in these years of searching; he labeled it “aesthetic experience” and talked much *about* it, but did not experience it much.²⁸

One aspect of Lewis’s journey that I find the most compelling and moving is his encounter with the philosopher Samuel Alexander and his book *Space, Time, and Deity*.²⁹ Alexander speaks of “enjoyment” and “contemplation.” For Alexander, “enjoyment” is about a process and “contemplation” is about an object.³⁰ So, as Lewis puts it (explaining Alexander), “When you see a table you ‘enjoy’ the act of seeing and ‘contemplate’ the table. Later, if you took up

²³ Ibid. 168.

²⁴ Ibid. 165.

²⁵ Ibid. 170. Lewis published these words in 1955, and he came to this conclusion forty years earlier. Imagine his thoughts if he were alive today, in our sex-drenched world, with illegitimate sex oozing from almost every cultural pore!

²⁶ Ibid. 171.

²⁷ Ibid. 180. Those who have read the fiction of both George MacDonald and Lewis realize the great influence of the former on the latter. The world MacDonald creates in *Phantastes*, for example, is very evocative of Lewis’s worlds of Narnia, Malacandra, Perelandra (somewhat), or even heaven (the latter in *The Great Divorce*).

²⁸ Ibid. 205.

²⁹ S. Alexander, *Space, Time, and Deity. The Gifford Lectures at Glasgow 1916–18*, 2 vols. (New York: The Humanities Press, 1920).

³⁰ This distinction is fundamental to Alexander’s entire work (ibid.). He introduces and makes explicit the distinction in vol. 1, pp. 10–18, especially pp. 10–13.

Optics and thought about Seeing itself, you would be contemplating the seeing and enjoying the thought.”³¹ This discovery had a great impact upon Lewis. “It seemed to me self-evident that one essential property of love, hate, fear, hope, or desire was attention to their object. To cease thinking about or attending to the woman is, so far, to cease loving; to cease thinking about or attending to the dreaded thing is, so far, to cease being afraid. But to attend to your own love or fear is to cease attending to the loved or dreaded object. In other words the enjoyment and the contemplation of our inner activities are incompatible. You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment.”³²

As a result of this, Lewis learned that all of his longings and striving after “Joy” had been “a futile attempt to contemplate the enjoyed.”³³ He had been focusing on a feeling, an experience, a process that had no Object. What he had been focusing on was “not the wave but the wave’s imprint on the sand.”³⁴ He realized that he had made “Joy” itself into an idol. He’d known that “Joy” was a desire, but he’d never realized that “a desire is turned not to itself but to its object.”³⁵ He learned that “Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring.”³⁶ He learned of awe—the OT would call this “fear” (יִרְאָה)—and that the answers were not within himself, but that “in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self.”³⁷

Finally, in a chapter entitled “Checkmate,” Lewis writes: “In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love

³¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 217.

³² *Ibid.* 218.

³³ *Ibid.* 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* 220.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* 221. All through the narrative of his spiritual journey and awakening, Lewis uses delightful imageries to show that he is conscious of God’s pursuit of him. For example, he writes at one late stage, “And so the great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue” (p. 211). He repeatedly speaks of his “alarm” at the “danger” he was in (namely, that his own, carefully built systems were in “danger” of being torn apart by the ultimate Reality, God himself). He found that all of the greatest books that he had read “were beginning to turn against me” (p. 213), i.e. that all of them showed him something of true religion. He was compelled to abandon, one after another, all of his old prejudices and snobberies, and to consider the existence of a true—and real—Deity. In his chapter titled “Checkmate,” he writes that “All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves” (p. 216). Then, as God was closing in, Lewis characterizes this as follows: “The fox had been dislodged from Hegelian Wood and was now running in the open, ‘with all the wo in the world,’ bedraggled and weary, hounds barely one field behind. And nearly everyone [he had ever read] was now (one way or another) in the pack. . . . Everyone and everything had joined the other side” (p. 225).

which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?”³⁸

This is a glorious and heartening testimony of one man’s journey to faith in God.³⁹ However, Lewis was not yet “home.” “Checkmate” is not the final chapter. He had to walk the final steps toward understanding who Jesus was—this Jesus of whom we have been speaking during this entire annual meeting, in plenary sessions and in countless papers. And, the story of his discovery of Jesus is the surprise ending of which I spoke earlier.

This is because, finally, Lewis discovered that his quest for “Joy”—and even his fleeting experiences of it over the years—was not, in the end, what he was really after. He had been focusing on the *experience*, on the *search*—his search. That is, his focus had not been on any particular *object*. But, as he began to believe and to pray (genuine prayer now, as opposed to the cold formality of religious exercise in which he had previously engaged), he found that these activities “were the beginning of extroversion.”⁴⁰ He was beginning, finally, to get beyond himself. And, Lewis found ultimate satisfaction, as he puts it, in knowing that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”⁴¹

Lewis then moves on to his conclusion, which is rather startling. He asks, “But what, in conclusion, of Joy? for that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian.”⁴² This statement is on the last page of the book, and it stunned me the first time I read it. Why, after so many years—and so many pages—of searching for “Joy,” would Lewis say that he now scarcely even *thought* about it?

The answer, as you certainly have guessed, is because of the presence in Lewis’s life now of the ultimate *Object* of affection. “Joy” itself was not to be worshiped, focused on, or “enjoyed” (in Alexander’s sense). Jesus Christ was. Lewis states, “I now know that the experience [of Joy], considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer.”⁴³ He speaks of signposts pointing the way out of the woods to someone lost there. The lost person is grateful to the signposts. But, in the end, they are not the object of the one who is lost; rather, that to which they point is the object.⁴⁴

³⁸ Ibid. 228–29.

³⁹ A recent book highlights Lewis’s process of conversion by examining much of the same ground as Lewis does in *Surprised by Joy*. It goes beyond Lewis, however, and provides a broader perspective, by supplementing this one book with materials from Lewis’s other writings, his letters, and the testimony of other people: David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis’ Journey to Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 233.

⁴¹ Ibid. 237.

⁴² Ibid. 238.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lewis’s remarkable transparency and self-disclosure is apparent even in the last sentence of the book, where he states dryly, “Not, of course, that I don’t often catch myself stopping to stare at roadside objects of even less importance” (p. 238).

II. JOY AND THE OBJECT OF OUR AFFECTIONS

As I have reflected on what Lewis wrote, and the biblical concept of joy, it is clear that joy is intended by God to be something that we humans very much do experience, even “enjoy” (in the normal sense, not Alexander’s). But, the key is that joy is not the object of our search. It is the result of that search, when we have found and experienced God in the fullness of his glory, in who he is, in the mighty acts that he does on our behalf.

Christians are as guilty as anyone else of confusing joy with pleasure or happiness. These latter things are fleeting; joy is something that does not fade with overexposure. Eating an ice cream sundae is a pleasure, but it soon turns to misery if one does not stop eating. Shopping is a pleasure (for some people), but it ultimately is empty; it does not bring lasting satisfaction. The pursuit of money is a pleasure for some, but it too does not satisfy. (Witness the famous reply by an industrialist of the nineteenth century when he was asked how much money was “enough” for true happiness [or joy]: “Just a little bit more.”⁴⁵) Sex is an intense physical pleasure, but it turns to exhaustion if pursued non-stop, or, worse, to *ennui*, to boredom. It too lacks the capacity to bring deep-seated, lasting satisfaction in and of itself.

True joy only comes as a result of our experience of God, not through the pursuit of various pleasures. On a mundane (meaning “earthly”) level, we can experience joy in things as simple as a beautiful sunset, a loved one’s presence, or a baby’s smile. These are things of which we should never tire.

I was privileged during my doctoral work to write a dissertation⁴⁶ wherein I was immersed in some of the most gloriously joyful language in all the Scriptures. I was studying Psalms 93–100, where wave after wave of joyful praise of YHWH the King comes cascading forth. These are the so-called “Kingship of YHWH” psalms, and the “book” of the Psalter in which they are found—Book IV: Psalms 90–106—has been called the editorial “center” of the Psalter,⁴⁷ in no small measure because of the great climax of praise found in these psalms.

Listen to some of the language here.⁴⁸

Psalm 95:

¹Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

⁴⁵ I have thought that this quote came from Andrew Carnegie or John D. Rockefeller, but I cannot now locate its source.

⁴⁶ Now published as *The Structure of Psalms 93–100* (University of California, San Diego Biblical and Judaic Studies 5; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

⁴⁷ Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 215.

⁴⁸ One of the rapidly disappearing practices in our churches today is the public reading of Scripture, and the Church is much the poorer for it. My former colleague, Tom McComiskey, had the right idea when he wrote an entire book on the subject: Thomas E. McComiskey, *Reading Scripture in Public* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). So, I urge you to listen carefully and reverentially—close your eyes, even—and let these magnificent texts wash over you with their power and their very evident sense of joy.

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.

⁶Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Psalm 96:

¹Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!

²Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.

³Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!

⁴For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.

⁶Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

⁷Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

⁸Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!

⁹Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

¹⁰Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.”

¹¹Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

¹²let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

¹³before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Psalm 97:

¹The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!

⁶The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all the peoples see his glory.

⁸Zion hears and is glad,
and the daughters of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O LORD.

⁹For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

Psalm 98:

¹Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!

His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

²The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

³He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

⁴Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

⁵Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!

⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!

⁸Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together

⁹before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Psalm 100:

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

²Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!

Give thanks to him; bless his name!

⁵For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

How can we hear this and not have a great sense of joy? How can we hear this and not want to fall prostrate before the King, or to dance before him, joyfully offering whatever praises we are capable of, however miserable they might be compared to the praises offered by all of creation itself?

In another one of his books, *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis ponders the question of why people should praise God.⁴⁹ Before his conversion, he “found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should ‘praise’ God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it.”⁵⁰ But, as he pondered it, he came to realize that all enjoyment eventually overflows into praise: “The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers prais-

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), in a section entitled “A Word About Praising” (pp. 90–98). In a serendipitous (or providential) appointment, I was recently reminded of this passage in a sermon on Psalm 117, delivered last month by John Piper, our ETS colleague at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 90.

ing the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least.”⁵¹

And, concerning that awkward trait of the Psalms—wherein there are incessant urgings to praise, causing a cynic possibly to ask, “Why don’t they stop talking *about* it and just get around to *doing* the praising?!”—Lewis realized something else, very profound. He writes, “I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?’ The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.”⁵²

The connection between praise—which is not in the title of my address—and joy—which *is* in my title—comes in that praising the Object of our affections brings us joy. Praise is something that is almost pulled out of us, in spite of ourselves, by the inherent qualities of its Object. We see something of the inherent quality of a thing in Psalm 1, where the object of affection is the law:

¹Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
²but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

The term for delight in verse 2 is *hēpeš*, and it carries the idea that the object of affection—or of contemplation, using Alexander’s term—is something so inherently desirable that it draws out of us a sense of desire and excitement to come to it.⁵³ G. J. Botterweck speaks of “the joyous existential commitment of one’s entire life” in this connection.⁵⁴

Lewis says that “*I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.*” It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent

⁵¹ Ibid. 94.

⁵² Ibid. 94–95.

⁵³ We who deal with Scripture sometimes are so close to it that it can become a burden to us, a mere object of study, another text to read, analyze, and to which we apply endless methodologies. We need to regain a sense of the Scriptures calling to us, “seducing” us, where we see in it an allure that makes us want to come to it joyfully, embrace it, listen to it, submit to it. This is the picture of the *torah* in Ps 1:2.

⁵⁴ G. Johannes Botterweck, “*הֵפֶשׁ* *hēpeš*,” *TDOT* 5.97.

because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with.”⁵⁵

So it is with God. He is the worthiest Object of all to praise. In our experience of him, we have great joy. The Psalmist (David) says in Psalm 16:11: “You make known to me the path of life; // in your presence there is fullness of joy; // at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

We are focused in this year’s annual meeting on the topic of “Jesus.”⁵⁶ It is a most worthy and exciting topic. We have enjoyed the plenary sessions and the papers. But, we have been distracted, too. We have dealt with a membership challenge that has consumed the Society for most of 2003, climaxing in our special business meeting last night.

But, “Jesus” is a worthy focus to which to return tonight. In the words of the author of Hebrews, we should “look to Jesus” (Heb 12:1–2):

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Do you remember the hymn inspired by those words (“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”)? Let us sing the chorus together:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.⁵⁷

III. “TERMINAL EARNESTNESS” AND JOY

There are so many things that compete for our attention, that distract us from truly worshiping, praising, enjoying God. Many of these things are good things, and many are not.

One thing that gets in the way of our joy is our desperate desire to do things right, or to “get it right.” It is something I call “terminal earnestness.” It is a condition wherein we are so desperate—so earnest—to “get things right” in the matter of spiritual affairs that we squeeze any joy completely out of our lives. We become as dead automatons, doing all the “right” things

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* 95 (emphasis mine). This is undoubtedly why we find so much junk mail in our e-mailboxes these days: people want to “share their joy (or brilliance/humor/outrage)” with us!

⁵⁶ In an expanded version of the official theme, this year’s program book is entitled: “Jesus Christ is the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever.”

⁵⁷ “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”: Lyrics and music by Helen H. Lemmel (1922). Public Domain. The hymn’s original title was “The Heavenly Vision.” Lemmel—a prolific hymn writer of more than 500 hymns, of which this was her most famous—took inspiration for the hymn from a short gospel tract entitled “Focussed,” written by Isabella Lilius Trotter (1853–1928), a missionary to Algeria. In this tract, Trotter wrote of being focused on Jesus alone: “Turn full your soul’s vision to Jesus, and look and look at Him, and a strange dimness will come over all that is apart from Him” (J. [sic] Lilius Trotter, “Focussed: A Story and a Song” [London: Marshall Brothers, n.d.] 8).

in all the “right” ways, but without any true life of the Spirit, without any joy in our lives.

Our terminal earnestness can include many things, such as “doing church” right, having the latest programs from the most successful churches, including their orders of service and just the right worship band. It can include keeping up with all the unwritten rules and regulations of whatever evangelical subculture to which we belong.⁵⁸ We can become almost like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, who worried so much about keeping the law that they ended up practicing absurdities and losing sight of their God. For example, their concerns led to an entire tractate of the Talmud (*Shabbath*) devoted just to regulations about keeping the Sabbath!⁵⁹

Such worrying can come from well-motivated impulses. The almost absurd regulations that eventuated in the tractate *Shabbath* came from the Pharisees’ sincere desires to know what it meant to keep the Sabbath commandment. In the process of trying to work this out, many Jews lost sight of the focus of the commandment—which was rest and remembrance, rooted in creation (Exodus 20) and in the exodus (Deuteronomy 5)—and they only saw the “doing”: the rules, the regulations, the constraints. They lost any sense of joy in the keeping and remembering.

So, too, in many of our evangelical subcultures we become so obsessed with “doing church” right that we squeeze any life of the Spirit out of our churches. We become so worried that we won’t have read the latest Barna poll, the most recent Willow Creek leadership materials, or the latest Sunday School materials from our denominational presses that we spend all our time reading secondary literature and surfing the Internet for the latest in church-related materials. We end up reading the Bible in a very cursory fashion, or not at all. We end up not spending quality time in prayer, and not listening to God in quiet meditation. We end up missing the presence of the Spirit in our lives—indeed, sometimes even quenching him.

We as laypeople are so worried about getting the “right” books on Christian marriage, parenting, dieting, exercise, ecology, relationships, Bible study, financial management, business practices—“Christian yoga,” even!—that we miss tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. In some circles, we worry so much about proper dress or clothing; going to movies, plays, dances; smoking, drinking, doing drugs; or any of a thousand other “vices,” that we miss any sense of joy in our lives.

But, the problems are not just with us as “misguided” laypeople. The problem also lies with us as Christian *scholars*. We scholars deal every day with

⁵⁸ I note with interest that my *alma mater*, Wheaton College, was in the news last week for allowing an on-campus dance for the first time ever—a radical break with certain “rules” in its subculture!

⁵⁹ It is the second-longest tractate in the Talmud (after *Baba Bathra*). The 157 folios (in 24 chapters) of *b. Shabbath* in the Soncino edition run to more than 800 pages (*The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed*: Vol. 1: *Shabbath* [trans. I. Epstein; London: Soncino, 1938]). Jacob Neusner’s *y. Shabbat* runs to almost 500 pages, but his is only a “preliminary” work, and it does not include the *Gemara* for chaps. 21–24 (*The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*: Vol. 11: *Shabbat* [trans. J. Neusner; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991]).

eternal verities—truths with eternal consequences and of the utmost import. Because of this we naturally—and rightly so!—do our utmost to “get it right.” We do this in our classes, and in our articles and our books. We do it in our papers and our discussions here in the Society. We spend our days, our months, our years studying the Scriptures, plumbing them for all the treasures therein. Sometimes the process itself can be a great joy. We have the joy of discovery. We have joy of seeing and learning. We have the joy of teaching others, watching them learn, develop, and grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures and of the Lord.

But a sense of terminal earnestness can also creep in, that sense whispering to us that if we do not get it right—if we cannot get it exactly the way it is “supposed” to be—then we are failures, at best, or heretics, at worst. This often leads to a sense of paralysis and of joylessness.

I regularly see this sense of paralysis in seminary students. They are processing huge amounts of new information in their various classes. They are learning many different methods for studying the Bible, for dealing with people, for solving problems. In the process, many of them lose almost any sense of the God behind the assignments, of the God toward whom the Scriptures point, of the God who should be the *reason* for the intense efforts that they are putting in. The Bible becomes for them little more than a textbook, just like any other book that they read in high school or college.

IV. THE JOY OF MEETING OUR MAKER

In the spring of 2000, I took our oldest daughter, Christina, who was in her early teens at the time, to a dramatic production in New Orleans entitled “Beyond the Grave: Class of 2000.” It was the type of play often performed in churches that focuses on people’s encounter with God after death. This one was very moving, based loosely as it was upon the Columbine tragedy that had taken place a few months earlier. In the first hour, the lives of five students and one teacher were portrayed, some of whom were Christians and some of whom were not. After three young men came into their classroom and shot them all dead, the second hour focused on each individual’s first encounter with God beyond the grave. Each was very dramatic, with powerful teachings about the gospel.

One brief moment from this production especially caught my attention, and it has to do with our topic of joy. One of the students who died had been a sweet, conscientious Christian in life. She was popular in school, winsome, and unashamed of her faith.⁶⁰ When she arrived at the great hall after death, she was at first bewildered, not knowing where she was. Tentatively, she called out, “Hello! . . . Hello!” Then, she recognized that she had arrived in heaven, and she began trembling with excitement and anticipation. She began laughing and jumping for joy, and exclaimed, “I know where I am.

⁶⁰ She was a composite of Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott of the Columbine tragedy.

*I know where I am! Ohhhhhh, God! I’ve been looking forward to this day ever since I was ten years old.”*⁶¹

As I reflected on this moment, I was very moved to see an 18-year-old girl (the character in the play) who had had a consciousness throughout her short life of looking forward to the day when she would meet her Savior. And, when she arrived, it was a moment of pure, unalloyed joy. To see Jesus: that had been her great desire, and it was now her great joy.

One of the criticisms leveled at certain pietistic traditions is that they are “so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly good,” and there is some truth in this criticism. But, in some other circles, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, such that there is scarcely even *any* thought of an eternity with God, of the great joy of an afterlife in his presence. Surely there is a proper balance, one that will allow us indeed to look forward with joyful anticipation to the day of seeing Jesus face to face.

V. THE JOY OF THE REDEEMED

This summer, I heard a song for the first time that I am going to have played for you shortly. It is called “Favorite Song of All.” It has been recorded a number of times; the recording I have is by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.⁶²

The title speaks of God’s “favorite” Song. The composition imagines God listening to the Song of creation and the Song of all his saints. He listens to the Song that is sustained throughout the ages in praise of him. But, as the lyrics indicate, his “favorite” Song of all is the Song of the newly redeemed soul, raising its voice for the first time in praise of God, joining the Song of the ages. It is this Song that God wants to hear above all others.

Whenever I listen to these words, the image in my mind is of a vast, drab, gray plain strewn with dead bodies—all of them dead in their sins, in the imagery of Eph 2:1, 5. One by one, many of them rise up and begin to sing their first notes of praise as the Holy Spirit passes along and gives them life. These souls who were dead in their sins now join the rest of creation in the Song of the ages. This, then, is indeed God’s “favorite” Song of all.⁶³ Consider this imagery as you listen to the recording.

⁶¹ “Beyond the Grave: Class of 2000” was presented by Victory Fellowship of Metairie, Louisiana, in the fall of 1999, originally slated for a two-week run. It had such an impact that it continued far beyond its original projections and is now entering its fifth year of production. A videotape of the production is available from Victory Fellowship at www.btg2000.com.

⁶² “Favorite Song of All,” on the album of the same name by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir (New York and Nashville: Warner Bros. Records, 1996). This particular recording is very dramatic and stirring.

⁶³ I do not want the impact of these words to be blunted by any quibbling we might have with the song’s theology. We might ask, “Why would God favor a Song from a newly born believer over that of a believer who had sung the Song faithfully over the course of a long life, or, for that matter, over that of a host of angels who had sung their Song faithfully throughout the ages?” My main point here in introducing “Favorite Song of All” is to return us to a proper focus on the great task that lies before us: of glorifying God in all we say and do, and of bringing people to a knowledge of him, through Christ, so that they, too, can begin to sing God’s “favorite” Song of all.

*“Favorite Song of All”*⁶⁴

He loves to hear the wind sing
 as it whistles through the pines on mountain peaks,
 And He loves to hear the raindrops
 as they splash to the ground in a magic melody.
 And He smiles in sweet approval
 as the waves crash to the rocks in their harmony;
 All creation joins in unity
 to sing to Him majestic symphonies.

But His favorite song of all
 Is the song of the redeemed,
 When lost sinners now made clean
 lift their voices loud and strong;
 When those purchased by His blood
 lift to Him a song of love.
 There’s nothing more He’d rather hear—
 None so pleasing to His ear—
 as His favorite song of all.

He loves to hear the angels
 as they sing, “Holy, holy is the Lamb!” —
 (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lamb!”)—
 Heaven’s choirs in harmony
 lift up praises to the Great I AM—
 (“Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”)—
 But He lifts His hands for silence
 when the weakest saved by grace begins to sing,
 And a million angels listen
 as a newborn soul sings, “I have been redeemed!”

That’s His favorite song of all:
 It’s the song of the redeemed,
 When lost sinners now made clean
 lift their voices loud and strong;
 When those purchased by His blood
 lift to Him a song of love.
 There’s nothing more He’d rather hear—
 None so pleasing to His ear—
 As His favorite song of all.

It’s not just melodies and harmonies
 that capture His attention,
 It’s not just clever lines and phrases
 that causes Him to stop and listen,
 But when any heart set free,
 Washed and bought by Calvary, begins to sing.

That’s His favorite song of all:
 It’s the song of the redeemed,

⁶⁴ “Favorite Song of All.” Lyrics and music by Dan Dean. © 1992 Dawn Treader Music (administered by EMI Christian Music Publishing). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

When lost sinners now made clean
 lift their voices loud and strong;
 When those purchased by His blood
 lift to Him a song of love.
 There’s nothing more He’d rather hear—
 None so pleasing to His ear—
 As His favorite song of all.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lamb! Hallelujah, Hallelujah!
 Holy, holy, holy is the Lamb! Hallelujah, Hallelujah!

We do much good as scholars, in presenting our papers, publishing our books, preparing our lectures, teaching our classes, and so much more. But, we must never forget that these ultimately must serve the purpose of glorifying God and pointing people to him. Our work must lead—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly—to new people joining in and singing God’s “favorite” Song of all. All of these things that we do are good, if they are done to his glory. All of these are good, if they are done with great joy. All of these are good, if they help to point people to Christ.

Ultimately, everything we do is to bring glory to God. We are Christians, first and foremost, and scholars after that. So, we too should rejoice with the God of all creation when even one newborn soul begins to sing the praises of God. We must be earnest about our task, but not terminally so. We must also be joyful.

VI. JOY TO THE WORLD

We are fast approaching Advent, when we rejoice in the birth of the Savior. To conclude tonight, I will ask you to sing “Joy to the World” with me. The primary Scripture text behind this great hymn is Psalm 98, which we read earlier. In a sense, this hymn is simply Psalm 98 put to music. Let us sing it together, with a great sense of joy.

“Joy to the World”⁶⁵

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
 Let earth receive her King;
 Let every heart prepare Him room,
 And heaven and nature sing,
 And heaven and nature sing,
 And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
 Let men their songs employ;
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
 Repeat the sounding joy,
 Repeat the sounding joy,
 Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

⁶⁵ “Joy to the World”: Lyrics by Isaac Watts (1719); music by Lowell Mason (1848). Public Domain.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

Now, as we dismiss, please listen to one of the great doxologies of Scripture (from Jude 24–25), one that speaks of the joy of redemption:

²⁴Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory *with great joy*, ²⁵to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.