

# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## Featuring: John Piper

John Piper is pastor of preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has written numerous books, including *Desiring God*, *Don't Waste Your Life*, and *Let the Nations Be Glad*.



## John Piper on the Nature of God

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# Great Teachers

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## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 1

LEADER'S GUIDE

### God Is an Important Person

*We should not take God for granted.*

Albert Einstein had little use for organized religion. Charles Misner had an idea of why: "The design of the universe ... is very magnificent and shouldn't be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion, although he strikes me as a basically religious man. He must have looked at what the preachers were saying about God and felt that they were blaspheming. My guess is that he simply felt that the religions he had run into didn't have a proper respect for the author of the universe."

**Scripture:**

Isaiah 48:9-11

**Based on:**

The sermon "God Is an Important Person," by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)

PART 1

## Identify the Current Issue

*Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

It is insulting to be taken for granted. Suppose you ask a man who is president of a company, "Who, other than God, is the most important person in your life?"

"I guess it would be my marketing manager."

"What about your wife?"

"Oh, of course, I just assumed that. I just take that for granted. It goes without saying."

A few people would assume that his abounding love and respect for his wife caused him to forget her. Most of us would assume that the reason she didn't come to mind is because she's not uppermost in his affections.

The wife wouldn't say, "I am so honored that I'm like the air he breathes. He never gives me a thought."

It's possible to take important things like oxygen for granted. If you're taken for granted, you might feel indispensable—but not treasured or honored.

### Discussion Questions:

[Q] How would it strike you if your spouse was the one in this illustration?

[Q] How can a person be indispensable, but not treasured or honored? Give an example.

➤ How might that relate to our relationship with God?

[Q] Do you think you take God for granted? Why or why not?

PART 2

## Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching point one: God is important to everything.

God is an important person because he created everything in the universe, including everybody and everything that we think is newsworthy and important. God is always acting for the honor of his name in all that he does. Read Isaiah 48:9–13.

[Q] What does the fact that God is the Creator mean to you? How does knowing that cause you to praise him?

God is an important person because he upholds the universe by the word of his power. He controls the affairs of all people and all nations with a conscious purpose and plan that originates in him. He changes times and epochs. Daniel tells us God removes kings and



establishes kings. God does his will among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What are you doing?"

God is an important person because he knows all things. He knows every motive behind every event—all causes, designs, effects, structures, secrets, and all possibilities real and unreal. Read Isaiah 46:9–10.

**[Q]** Give examples of how God controls the affairs of people and nations.

**[Q]** Humans often ask God, "What are you doing?" How might we find comfort in knowing that God knows what he is doing, even though we do not?

- How can we take that one step further and praise God even when we don't understand what he is doing? How must we view God to be able to do that?

God is an important person because he's the only path to eternal life and the only source of everlasting joy. Nowhere else can we find pleasures that last forever and fill us to the brim. Read Psalm 16:11.

**[Q]** Have you ever experienced joy in God's presence? If so, describe it briefly.

**[Q]** What does it mean to have eternal pleasures at his right hand? Does that start now, or do we have to wait until we get to heaven? Explain.

God is an important person because his Son stands at the center of human history and is the source and measure of all truth and beauty and goodness. On God's saving grace hangs the destiny of every single human being on the face of the earth.

**[Q]** How is Christ, the Son, at the center of human history?

**[Q]** How do you know that Christ is the source of all truth, beauty, and goodness?

### Teaching point two: God doesn't like being taken for granted.

God is an important person who does not like to be taken for granted. He is so great that no image or metaphor can completely describe him because they are inadequate.

Read Psalm 47.

Because God is always the greatest and most important person in everything we do, he is to be spoken of and written of and thought of all the time. God makes known his displeasure with being taken for granted by telling us again and again in his Word that his aim in every detail, from creation to consummation, is that he be honored, praised, glorified, loved, treasured, trusted, sung, declared, confessed, and enjoyed.

**[Q]** Why do all images and metaphors of God ultimately fail?

**Leader's Note:** *We will be able to capture bits and pieces of God, but never the whole. That doesn't mean we can never use metaphors or images to portray him, but we must realize how inadequate they are.*



God will not be forgotten, taken for granted, or ignored. He tells us no Christian should take him for granted. Everything we do, whether eating or drinking, we should do to the glory of God. God tells us that demons and angels will not be able to take him for granted. Not one nation or people on the face of the earth will be allowed to take him for granted. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall come and worship before him because dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the earth. Read Philippians 2:5–11.

**[Q]** What kind of picture comes to mind as you read the end of this passage?

**[Q]** How does this show that God will not ultimately be taken for granted by anyone?

According to John 16:14, the Spirit comes with infinite energy to do one thing: glorify the Son of God. All the energy and attention of the Holy Spirit is devoted to seeing to it that the Son is not taken for granted, but glorified among his people.

Jesus, the Son of God, said, “Father, for this purpose I have come into the world. Glorify yourself.”

Most importantly, God does not take himself for granted. God is central to God. God is supreme in the heart of God. “For this purpose I have raised you up,” he says to Pharaoh. “For this purpose I have raised you up that I might declare my name among all the world.”

In the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* there is an entire section for sports. Can you believe an entire section of the newspaper for sports, and not one column for God? Not one column is written about the maker of the universe, who upholds the whole Coles Media industry by the power of his word. Not one minute for God in the news; not one page in *Newsweek* or *Time*. In 12 years of public education, not one hour relates to God.

What about evangelicals? Some church growth seminars never mention God. Some lectures and talks on pastoral issues do not even allude to God. Some seminaries have manifold practical courses where God is peripheral at best. Some mission statements of major evangelical organizations don't even mention Christ or God.

God is an important person, and he does not like being taken for granted. To be ignored flies in the face of God's eternal purpose: to be known and loved and praised and enjoyed.

**[Q]** What are some ways that you ignore God?

**[Q]** What are some practical steps you can take to make God central in everything you do?

### **Optional Activity**

**Purpose:** To help us understand that God can be central to all that we do.

**Activity:** Discuss how God can be central or be ignored in each of the following activities:

- *Cooking a meal*
- *Writing a letter*
- *Singing in church*
- *Driving a car*



- *Sharing your faith*
- *Attending a business meeting*
- *Having a daily devotional time*

### Teaching point three: Neglecting the importance of God robs us of fullness of life.

When we take God for granted, it makes us superficial people: superficial pastors, superficial journalists, superficial educators. No matter how esteemed we are in the guild, no matter how many titles are after our names, no matter how many books may be written by us or about us, when the last word is spoken we will be superficial.

To be superficial is to deal with a subject and leave out the connection that gives it meaning and significance. If you deal with any subject in the little cocoon of godlessness, it is superficial no matter what prize it may win. God doesn't like being taken for granted.

God holds all your molecules together moment by moment by the word of his power. He runs the world. He determines all things. Everything gets its meaning and significance from him. Everything without exception has to do with God, not secondarily but mainly. Not to show this is to be superficial and to fly in the face of God's purposes to be honored, loved, trusted, and treasured.

When a man forgets to mention his wife as a priority in his life, there is a defect in his life, in his love. When a Christian is asked about the priority of his life, or when a Christian can spend hour after hour talking or writing about things and not have God come to mind, there is a defect in that person's love. The healing for that defect is an hourly reveling in God—savoring him, delighting in him.

The reason God does not like being taken for granted is not only that it robs him of glory, but it robs us of joy. One of the greatest discoveries we can make is that these two things are not at odds.

That's the gospel. The gospel is the good news that the goal of the holy God to be glorified and the goal of a sinful creature to be satisfied are not at odds but, in fact, come to simultaneous consummation in one experience called worship. God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him. We find a declaration of triumph in the sovereign purpose of God to be glorified in the world by satisfying his people in him.

**[Q]** What does it mean to savor and delight in God?

**[Q]** Does it ever grieve you when God seems to be ignored and neglected? Explain.

**[Q]** What does it mean that "God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him"?

#### PART 3

### Apply Your Findings

Find your satisfaction in God—not in your career, not in your family, not in your health, not in your fame, not in your accomplishments. Find your heart's satisfaction in God. You will not



take him for granted because he will be the treasure and the pleasure of your life, moment by moment.

**Action Point:** Name practical ways that you can learn to find your satisfaction in God. What may be taking the place of affection for him in your life: career, family, wealth? Admit your answer to the group and pray for one another that you will not take God for granted, but that he will be your delight.

—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon



# Great Teachers

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## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 1

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

### God Is an Important Person

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**PART 1**

## **Identify the Current Issue**

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“I guess it would be my marketing manager.”

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It's possible to take important things like oxygen for granted. If you're taken for granted, you might feel indispensable—but not treasured or honored.

**PART 2**

## **Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: God is important to everything.**

**Teaching point two: God doesn't like being taken for granted.**

**Teaching point three: Neglecting the importance of God robs us of fullness of life.**

**PART 3**

## **Apply Your Findings**

Find your satisfaction in God—not in your career, not in your family, not in your health, not in your fame, not in your accomplishments. Find your heart's satisfaction in God. You will not take him for granted because he will be the treasure and the pleasure of your life, moment by moment.

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# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 2

### LEADER'S GUIDE

## God Is for Us and for Himself

*God's chief end is to please himself, which means he is also for us.*

The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Or to put it another way, the chief end of God is to enjoy glorifying himself. The reason that might sound strange is because we are more familiar with our duties than we are with God's designs.

We know why we exist. We exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, but why does God exist? What should God love with all his heart and all his soul and all his mind and all his strength? What should God worship? Or will we deny to him the highest of pleasures?

#### **Scripture:**

Psalm 106:7–8; Isaiah 43:6–7; Jeremiah 13:11; Ezekiel 20:9; 1 Samuel 12:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10

#### **Based on:**

The sermon "Is God for Us or for Himself?" by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)

PART 1

## Identify the Current Issue

*Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

It matters a lot what God's highest allegiances are. I have four sons. If you were to ask them, "What's your dad's highest allegiance?" and they said, "I don't know," I'd be real disappointed. And if you asked them, "What lies heaviest on your dad's heart? What does he pursue in everything he does? What's his goal? What's he passionately committed to?" and they said, "I don't care," I would be really crushed.

It matters a lot for a child of God to know what lies heaviest on his father's heart.

Now God didn't leave us without an answer to the question: What is the impulse that drives the Almighty? What is he pursuing in everything that he does?

It lies on the face of the Scriptures at every point—from creation to consummation.

So, what drives God? Why does he do what he does? What moves him in all of his actions? Why did he create us? Read Isaiah 43:6–7.

Why did he choose the people of Israel and bind them to himself and cause them to cling to him as his own possession? Read Jeremiah 13:11.

Why did he rescue them from Egypt, especially when they rebelled against him at the Red Sea and didn't believe his promises? Read Psalm 106:7–8.

Why did he spare them again and again and again in the wilderness, when they murmured and rebelled against him there? Read Ezekiel 20:9.

Why didn't he level his rebellious people? Read 1 Samuel 12:22.

Why did Jesus come? "Father the hour has come. Glorify the Son that the Son may glorify Thee." He came and suffered that the Godhead might be glorified in the work of redemption.

Finally, why is he coming again? Why is the Lord going to bring it all to a grand consummation and stand upon the earth as king? Read 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10.

That's why he's coming. From beginning to end the impulse of God's heart is to be praised for his glory. From creation to consummation his ultimate allegiance is to himself. He is coming to be marveled at by all who believe, and to have the honor of his name vindicated and exalted. He is infinitely jealous for his reputation. "For my own sake, for my own sake I act," says the Lord. "My glory I will not give to another." My experience has been that evangelicals receive this message with skepticism, if they receive it at all.

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What do you think of these verses that bear out that God acts for his own sake?
- [Q] What difference would truly believing this have on the way you live your life?
- [Q] Why do Christians often reject this idea?



PART 2

## Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching point one: We object to God's chief end being that he wants to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever, because we don't typically like people who seek their own glory.**

My sons have never brought home a Sunday school paper with a lesson titled "God Loves Himself." But it is profoundly true, and therefore generation after generation of evangelicals grow up in this land picturing themselves as the center of God's universe.

We don't like people who pursue their own glory and try to win praise from others. Besides, the Bible says not to act like that.

We do not like people who are enamored by their own skill, power, or looks. We don't like scholars who parade their books before us. We don't like businessmen who go on and on about how shrewdly they've invested. And we don't like children when they're always playing the "I'm better than you are" game and trying to get compliments from their friends.

Why don't we like those kinds of people? Probably because they are inauthentic. They are what Ayn Rand calls secondhanders. They live secondhand. They are always calculating, always maneuvering, always posturing to get compliments, praise, and approval, because that's the source of their life.

We admire people who are composed, secure, at peace with themselves and their surroundings—so much so that they don't need to shore up their weaknesses by trying to win compliments. They don't need to compensate for their deficiencies by trying to get praise from other people. That's the kind of people we admire. Therefore, any teaching that seems to put God in the category of a secondhand is in trouble. And the teaching that God is always out for his praise, wants to be marveled at, is doing everything for the sake of his own glory seems to put him in the category of a secondhand.

But God has no deficiencies for which he needs to compensate. God has no weaknesses that he needs to make up for or hide. From him, through him, and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever. There is nothing that you can supply to God. Everything that God is, he is from all eternity. Anything that you offer back to him, he has already given to you. There is no way for him to compensate for weaknesses. He has none. There must be some other explanation for why he pursues our praise.

**[Q]** So, if God doesn't seek praise to compensate for his deficiencies, why does he seek it?

**[Q]** What is the difference between God acting for his glory and we humans acting for ours?

**[Q]** Why would God love himself, and why isn't that selfish?

**Teaching point two: We object to God's chief end being that he wants to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever, because we think that if he is for himself, he can't be for us.**

There's a second reason why we don't like people who act like this. Not only are they inauthentic, but they are often unloving. They are so concerned with how they're coming across



that they don't have any thought for whether anybody else has needs. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

**[Q]** With this definition of love, how can God be loving if he is self-seeking?

**[Q]** So is he a loving God? Is he for us, or is he for himself? Explain your answer.

**[Q]** In order for God to seem loving to you, what must he do? What will bring you eternal and maximum fulfillment and joy?

**[Q]** How does God's love for himself spill over into love for us?

If God isn't for himself, he can't be for us. If he doesn't preserve his own glory, he'll have nothing loving to do for us. There is only one way he can bring us fulfillment and joy—by giving us himself.

If God were to make you happy with your pride, prestige, money, grades, or job and not give you himself for fellowship, contemplation, and enjoyment, he would not be a loving God—no matter what you feel your needs are right now. If God is a loving God, he must offer us nothing less than himself—fully, completely, for our enjoyment.

**[Q]** Most of us would agree that love is not simply giving people what they want, but what will be best for them. How is the fact that God gives us himself the best for us?

**[Q]** Do you enjoy God? What do you think that means?

When you receive a gift or when you are shown something excellent, beautiful, admirable, and awesome, how do you respond? You praise it.

All of us do that. We praise little newborn babies by saying, "Oh look at that nice round head, and all that hair, and aren't his hands just right? Just look at those fingers." Lovers praise each other because they find the other person delightful. We praise beautiful trees and grand slams in the bottom of the ninth when we're down by three.

But C. S. Lewis taught that we don't just stick praise on the end of joy. Praise is joy's consummation. If you don't praise what you delight in, you're frustrated. The joy is truncated. It isn't full. Lewis says:

"The most obvious thing about praise, whether of God or anything, strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise. Lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game, praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars."

Our general difficulty with the praise of God involves our absurd denial of the supreme value of what we delight to do—indeed what we can't help doing with everything we value. We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely *expresses*—here's the key—but *completes* the enjoyment. It is its consummation.



It is not to compliment that lovers keep telling one another how beautiful they are. The delight is incomplete until it is expressed. We praise what we enjoy because the delight is not complete until we praise it. When God gives us himself as the ultimate object of enjoyment, he would be unloving if he did not pursue the consummation of our joy in the praise of his glory.

**[Q]** What kind of things do you most often praise? Name a few.

**[Q]** What does it do for you to praise something that is noteworthy?

**[Q]** What does praising God do for us?

### **Optional Activity**

**Purpose:** *To help us understand why God can seek his own glory.*

**Activity:** *On a whiteboard or poster board, list all the reasons why God is praiseworthy, and thus can delight in himself. Using things in Scripture that you know to be true about God, list as many things as you can think of.*

### **PART 3**

## **Apply Your Findings**

God is the one being in the whole universe for whom praise is the highest virtue. God is the one being in the universe for whom to pursue praise for himself is the most loving thing that he could possibly do. Do not resent the centrality of God in his own affections, but experience that centrality as the fountain of your everlasting joy.

**Action Point:** How can you find joy and delight in God? How might your perception of him need to change in order to fully enjoy him? Tell the group one perception you have of God that you know is false. Pray for each other to understand who God truly is so that you can delight in him.

—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon



# Great Teachers

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## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 2

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

### God Is for Us and for Himself

*God's chief end is to please himself, which means he is also for us.*

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We know why we exist. We exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, but why does God exist? What should God love with all his heart and all his soul and all his mind and all his strength? What should God worship? Or will we deny to him the highest of pleasures?

**Scripture:**

Psalms 106:7-8; Isaiah 43:6-7; Jeremiah 13:11; Ezekiel 20:9; 1 Samuel 12:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

**Based on:**

The sermon "Is God for Us or for Himself?" by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)



**PART 1**

## **Identify the Current Issue**

God didn't leave us without an answer to the question, "What is the impulse that drives the Almighty? What is he pursuing in everything that he does?" It lies on the face of the Scriptures at every point—from creation to consummation.

From beginning to end the impulse of God's heart is to be praised for his glory. From creation to consummation his ultimate allegiance is to himself. He is coming to be marveled at by all who believe, and to have the honor of his name vindicated and exalted. He is infinitely jealous for his reputation. "For my own sake, for my own sake I act," says the Lord. "My glory I will not give to another." My experience has been that evangelicals receive this message with skepticism, if they receive it at all.

**PART 2**

## **Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: We object to God's chief end being that he wants to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever, because we don't typically like people who seek their own glory.**

**Teaching point two: We object to God's chief end being that he wants to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever, because we think that if he is for himself, he can't be for us.**

**PART 3**

## **Apply Your Findings**

God is the one being in the whole universe for whom praise is the highest virtue. God is the one being in the universe for whom to pursue praise for himself is the most loving thing that he could possibly do. Do not resent the centrality of God in his own affections, but experience that centrality as the fountain of your everlasting joy.

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# Great Teachers

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## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 3

LEADER'S GUIDE

### God Is in Control

*We are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, because we know God is in charge.*

It is overwhelming to know that 50,000,000 people die every year in this world. Over 6,000 every hour. Over 100 every minute. And most of them do not die in ripe old age, slipping peacefully away into eternity. Most die young. Most die after long struggles with pain. And millions die because of the evil of man against man.

Sudden calamities only make plainer what is happening every hour of every day. If there is to be any Christian joy in this world, along with love, it will be sorrowful joy, brokenhearted joy. What person who has lived long enough does not know that the sweetest joys, the deepest joys, are marked with tears, not laughter?

**Scripture:**

2 Corinthians 6:10

**Based on:**

The sermon "The Supremacy of Christ in an Age of Terror," by John Piper, PreachingToday.com



PART 1

## Identify the Current Issue

*Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

God is in charge of all things—no exceptions.

One of the biblical truths that we embrace with trembling joy is that God is supreme in all things. When we say that, we do not mean: “except in calamities,” “except in war,” “except when Al Qaeda blows up a building or a train,” “except when cancer takes a mom or a child is born with profound disabilities.” There are no “except” clauses to this truth.

We do not say this glibly, and then get surprised and embarrassed by the reality of suffering. We do not have our heads in the sand. We live in the real world of pain, suffering, evil, and death. But we are confident that God knows what he is doing.

None of us who has lived a few decades has embraced this truth without trembling. And none of us has lived this mission for long without tears. The joy we pursue and the joy we embrace in Jesus Christ is always—in this world—interwoven with sorrow. There is no unadulterated joy in this world for people who care about others. The Bible describes Christ's servants like this: “Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

How can that be? It can be because Christ is supreme over all things forever, but suffering and death remain for a while. Life is not simple. There is pleasure, and there is pain. There is sweetness, and there is bitter suffering. There is joy, and there is misery. There is life and health, and there is disease and death. And therefore emotions are not simple. For those who love others, and not just their own comforts, this complexity means that we will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). And there is always someone we know who is weeping, and someone we know who is rejoicing. And therefore we will learn the secret of “sorrowful yet always rejoicing”—and joyful yet always sorrowing. Those amazing words that describe the Christian soul—“sorrowful yet always rejoicing”—mean that suffering remains for a while in this world, but Christ is supreme now and forever.

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Give an example of how joy is interwoven with sorrow for the Christian.
- [Q] How can we rejoice even when there is sorrow? Give an example.
- [Q] How does knowing that God is supreme in all things give us comfort in the midst of suffering?

PART 2

## Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching point one: Evil and pain point us to our need for God.

In our souls—believers or unbelievers—there is a witness that the world of evil, pain, misery, and death is not a meaningless place. It is not a place without a good and purposeful God. Some



people, not all, have found in the greatest evil—the time of greatest sorrow—the greatest need for God and the greatest evidence of God.

It happens like this. A great evil happens—say the Holocaust with 6,000,000 murders. Or the Stalinist Soviet Gulag with many more than that sent to their deaths. In the midst of these horrors, the human soul, which had been blithely pursuing its worldly pleasures with scarcely a thought about God and with no serious belief in absolutes like evil and good, right and wrong, is suddenly confronted with an evil so horrible and so great as to make the soul scream out with ultimate moral indignation: No! This is wrong! This is evil!

And for the first time in their lives, they hear themselves speaking with absolute conviction. They have a conviction of absolute reality. They know now beyond a shadow of a doubt that such a thing as evil exists. They admit that all their life up till then was a game. And now they are confronted with the stark question: If there is such a thing as absolute evil, if there is a moral reality that is above and different from the mere physical processes of evolutionary energy plus time plus matter, then where does it come from, and what is it based on?

Many people discover in this moment of greatest evil that there is only one satisfactory answer: There is a God above the universe who sets the standards of good and evil and writes them on the human heart. They are not purposeless chemical reactions in our brains. They have reality outside of us, above us, in God. Paradoxically, therefore, the times of greatest human evil have often proved for many to be times when God is most needed and most self-evidently real. Without him, evil and good are simply different electro-chemical impulses in the brains of primates called *Homo sapiens*. We know—you know—that is not true.

**[Q]** How has pain or difficulty helped you see your need for God?

- How has pain or difficulty helped you mature in your faith?

**[Q]** Give examples of how you have seen suffering bring others closer to God.

**[Q]** Can you think of a time that someone's suffering gave you an opportunity to talk about God? If so, tell us about it.

### **Teaching point two: Evil does not prove that God is not in control of the world, or that he is evil.**

We ask: Why, Lord? Why is the world you made like this? If you are God—if you are the Christ, the Son of the living God—why is this world so full of terror and trouble?

We don't know all of God's reasons for making the world this way, but we can be certain that he has good reasons. It has not just gotten out of his control. The Bible is overwhelmingly clear that God governs everything in the universe, from the smallest bird to the largest storm. Read the following verses: Proverbs 16:33; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 46:9–10; Lamentations 3:37; Amos 3:6; Matthew 8:27; Matthew 10:29; and Mark 1:27.

There is no person or being in the universe that can thwart God. Satan is his most powerful enemy and does much evil in the world, but he must first get God's permission, and none of his actions are outside God's governance. He never breaks free from his leash. Read Job 2:6–7; Job 42:11; Luke 22:31.

Neither is God evil. We could read endlessly about God's goodness in the Bible, but to get a taste read Genesis 50:20; Psalm 25:8; Isaiah 6:3; Romans 8:28; and 1 John 1:5.



[Q] What difference does it make to your suffering to know that God is in control?

[Q] What difference does it make to know that Satan can do nothing without God's permission?

[Q] Why is it so important that we understand that God is good, no matter what?

### Teaching point three: Evil exists because of sin.

The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God planned the history of redemption and then permitted sin to enter the world through our first parents, Adam and Eve. Read 2 Timothy 1:9.

In other words, before there was any world or any sin in the world, God planned saving grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That means that God knew Adam would sin. He was already planning how he would save us.

Therefore Adam's sin was part of God's plan, so that God could reveal his mercy and grace and justice and wrath and patience and wisdom in ways that could have never been revealed if there were no sin and no Savior and no history of salvation. God's aim for this fallen world is that he be known more fully, because knowing God most fully is what it means for us to be most fully loved. If you turn to Christ, you will discover in God more wonders in this fallen world than could be imagined in any other world.

Another reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God put the natural world under a curse so that the physical horrors we see around us in diseases and calamities would become a vivid picture of how horrible sin is. In other words, natural evil is a signpost pointing to the horrors of moral evil.

Hear this word of clarification: some of the sweetest, most humble, godly, Christ-exalting, heaven-bound people carry some of those signs. Read Romans 8:18–21.

In other words, God subjected the Creation to futility, bondage, decay, misery, and death. He disordered the natural world because of the disorder of the moral and spiritual world—that is, because of sin. In our present condition, blinded by sin and dishonoring God every day, we cannot see how repugnant sin is. Hardly anyone in the world feels the horror of our sin. Physical pain we feel! And so it becomes God's trumpet blast to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong in the world. Diseases and deformities are God's portraits of what sin is like in the spiritual realm. That is true even though some of the godliest people bear those deformities. Calamities are God's previews of what sin deserves and will one day receive in judgment, a thousand times worse. They are warnings. And that is true even when they sweep away both Christ-followers and Christ-rejecters.

Oh, that we could all see and feel how repugnant, how offensive, how abominable it is to blackball our Maker; to ignore, distrust, and demean him; and to give him less attention in our hearts than we do the carpet on our living room floor. We must see this, or we will not turn to Christ for salvation from sin. Therefore, God mercifully shouts to us in our sicknesses and pain and calamities: Wake up! Sin is like this! Sin leads to things like this!

Read Revelation 9:20 and 16:9, 11.

The natural world is shot through with horrors to wake us from the dream world of thinking sin is no big deal. It is a horrifically big deal.



- [Q] When have you caught a glimpse of the awfulness of your own sin?
- [Q] How do we ignore, distrust, and demean our Maker? Give examples.
- [Q] Has someone else's sin ever caused you to recognize your own sin? If so, how?
- [Q] Why is it so important that we realize sin is a horrifically big deal?

### **Optional Activity**

**Purpose:** *To help us understand the seriousness of sin.*

**Activity:** *Provide everyone with pen and paper. Ask them to make two columns. One should be titled GOD, and the other with the person's name. Under the GOD column, ask them to list all the good qualities they know are true about God, such as patience, compassion, mercy, and so on. Under their own name, ask them to list the corresponding ways they sin, such as impatience, hate, cruelty, and so on. When everyone is done, discuss how this affected them.*

### **Teaching point four: Evil exists so that we can realize there is no treasure like Jesus Christ.**

The reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is so that followers of Christ can experience and display that no pleasure or treasure compares to knowing Christ. That is, the loss of every good thing in this world is meant to reveal that Christ himself more than compensates for all losses.

We see it in the New Testament and the Old Testament. Read Philippians 3:8.

The superior worth of Christ is magnified because, in all Paul's losses, he experienced Christ as all-satisfying.

The prophet Habakkuk said it with amazing and painful beauty. Read Habakkuk 3:17–18.

Famines, pestilence, persecution—these happen so that the world might see in the followers of Jesus, and discover for themselves, that God made us for himself and that he is our “exceeding joy” (Psalm 43:4), at whose right hand are pleasures forever more (Psalm 16:11). The losses of life are meant to wean us off the poisonous pleasures of the world and lure us to Christ, our everlasting joy.

Finally, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is to make a place for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer and die for our sins. Read Romans 5:8.

The plan of God was to reveal his redeeming love to us. The sovereignty of God, the evil of the world, and the love of God meet at the cross of Christ. Read the amazing statement in Acts 4:27–28 about God's plan for the suffering of his Son—for you!

All the scheming, all the flogging, all the spitting, all the beating with rods, all the mockery, all the abandonment by his friends, all the thorns in his head, all the nails in his hands and feet, the sword in his side, the weight of the sins of the world—all of it is according to God's plan for you to see God's love more graphically.

- [Q] How do evil and suffering help us to understand that Christ is our greatest treasure? Give an example from your own life if you can.



PART 3

## Apply Your Findings

God's deepest answer to terrorism and calamity is the suffering and death of his Son. He entered into our fallen world of sin, misery, and death. He bore in himself the cause of it all—sin. And he bought by his death the cure for it all—forgiveness and everlasting joy in the age to come.

**Action Point:** Is Christ the supreme treasure of your life? Do you value him more than your own comfort? If not, what is holding you back? Are you holding on to sin? Are you afraid of God? Are you just trying to make life as easy as possible? Take a few moments of silence to think about these questions, and then share your answers with the group. Pray for each other concerning these things.

*—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon*



# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 3

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

### God Is in Control

*We are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, because we know God is in charge.*

It is overwhelming to know that 50,000,000 people die every year in this world. Over 6,000 every hour. Over 100 every minute. And most of them do not die in ripe old age, slipping peacefully away into eternity. Most die young. Most die after long struggles with pain. And millions die because of the evil of man against man.

Sudden calamities only make plainer what is happening every hour of every day. If there is to be any Christian joy in this world, along with love, it will be sorrowful joy, brokenhearted joy. What person who has lived long enough does not know that the sweetest joys, the deepest joys, are marked with tears, not laughter?

**Scripture:**

2 Corinthians 6:10

**Based on:**

The sermon "The Supremacy of Christ in an Age of Terror," by John Piper, PreachingToday.com



**PART 1**

**Identify the Current Issue**

The Bible describes Christ's servants like this: "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10).

"Sorrowful yet always rejoicing." How can that be? It can be because Christ is supreme over all things forever, but suffering and death remain for a while. Life is not simple. There is pleasure, and there is pain. There is sweetness, and there is bitter suffering. There is joy, and there is misery. There is life and health, and there is disease and death. And therefore emotions are not simple. For those who love others, and not just their own comforts, this complexity means that we will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). And there is always someone we know who is weeping, and someone we know who is rejoicing. And therefore we will learn the secret of "sorrowful yet always rejoicing"—and joyful yet always sorrowing. Those amazing words that describe the Christian soul—"sorrowful yet always rejoicing"—mean that suffering remains for a while in this world, but Christ is supreme now and forever.

**PART 2**

**Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: Evil and pain point us to our need for God.**

**Teaching point two: Evil does not prove that God is not in control of the world or that he is evil.**

**Teaching point three: Evil exists because of sin.**

**Teaching point four: Evil exists so that we can realize there is no treasure like Jesus Christ.**

**PART 3**

**Apply Your Findings**

God's deepest answer to terrorism and calamity is the suffering and death of his Son. He entered into our fallen world of sin, misery, and death. He bore in himself the cause of it all—sin. And he bought by his death the cure for it all—forgiveness and everlasting joy in the age to come.

*—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon*



# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 4

LEADER'S GUIDE

### God Is Our Avenger

*We overcome the dangers of anger by allowing God to be our avenger.*

Many people hide their anger by keeping up a good front. The trouble is that anger that is kept corked inside ferments. Other people blow off steam as soon as anything happens to them. Still others turn red in the face and grip the edge of the chair as their knuckles turn white. Some become sullen and quiet and slink out of sight. Others become caustic and cutting with their tongue. Whatever way you handle or respond to anger, it's a universal experience. Everybody has to learn to deal with it one way or another.

**Scripture:**

Romans 12:19

**Based on:**

The sermon "Battling the Unbelief of Bitterness," by John Piper, PreachingToday.com

PART 1

## Identify the Current Issue

*Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

The Bible warns us about the dangers of anger: "Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God."

In other words, be slow to anger because most of our anger is a lot of man and very little of God. Such anger does nobody any good and brings no glory to God. Most of our anger is like that, but not all of it.

Jesus was a man without sin, but Mark 3:5 says: "He looked out upon them with grief, angered at their hardness of heart." Yet he committed no sin. Psalm 7:11 says that God is angry every day. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Be angry and yet do not sin."

So not all anger is bad. In fact, some anger is good. If we didn't occasionally get angry, something would be morally wrong with us. But mostly the Bible warns against anger. The Bible is suspicious of our capacity as sinful human beings to have good anger. Read James 1:19–20; Colossians 3:8; Ephesians 4:31; Galatians 5:19–20; and Matthew 5:22.

Anger is dangerous. If you let it take root and become an abiding grudge or an unforgiving spirit, it can destroy you. That's the point of the parable in Matthew 18, where the king mercifully cancels his servant's enormous debt. And the rascal walks out, failing to cherish this gift, and strangles his friend who owes him a miniscule amount. The king hears about this, is enraged, and throws the rascal into jail permanently. The parable closes with a warning to us. Read Matthew 18:35.

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What do you usually do when you're angry—do you hold it in, explode, seethe, put others down?
- [Q] What is the difference between righteous anger and sinful anger? Give examples.
- [Q] How can anger destroy you?

PART 2

## Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching point one: Our anger and failure to forgive are actually expressions of unbelief.

It's very dangerous to be angry and stay angry. It can take over your heart and dominate you. You will also be judged. Read Matthew 6:15.

To let that have its appropriate impact, we've got to break it down into three statements.

1. No one goes to heaven unforgiven by God. Heaven is a place for forgiven sinners, not unforgiven sinners.



2. No one who is unforgiving will be forgiven by God.
3. Therefore, no one who is unforgiving goes to heaven.

Is salvation then by works? No. Salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). Our salvation happens when, by the grace of God, we trust the promises of God.

The opposite of faith is unbelief. The pathway that leads to judgment is our effort at working toward our own salvation and failing to believe in the promises of God. Therefore, when Jesus said that if you don't forgive those who sin against you, you'll be judged, he meant that an unforgiving spirit is an unbelieving spirit. Therefore the fight against bitterness is the fight against unbelief.

When we cling to bitterness, we are not trusting God to take care of the wrong that we have experienced. When we do believe God is just and will take care of all wrongs, peace replaces bitterness. Read Romans 15:13.

**[Q]** Why do you think people refuse to forgive others? Name as many reasons as you can think of.

- Thinking of those things, how would each of them show that the person does not really believe God?

**[Q]** Why is this qualification to our forgiveness not a way to earn our salvation?

**[Q]** Have you ever seen peace take over bitterness in your life? If so, tell us about it.

### Teaching point two: Believe that God is good and has your best in mind.

Colossians 3:8 tells us to get rid of anger. It's like the doctor saying, "Get rid of coffee." You just have to believe it. If you believe him, you'll do it. If you don't believe him, you won't.

In his book *The Lost Art of Discipleship*, Leroy Imes tells a story about anger.

Shortly after I became a Christian, I was challenged to make personal applications as part of my weekly Bible study. One of the first books I studied was Paul's letter to the Colossians. As I was studying chapter three, the Holy Spirit caught my attention with this verse: "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language." I tried to slide past this verse, but the Spirit kept bringing me back to the words "Put off anger." At the time I had a violent temper, and whenever it flared up I would haul up and bash my fist into the nearest door. In spite of the fact that I often bloodied my knuckles and on one occasion had completely smashed a beautiful diamond and onyx ring that my wife had given me, I couldn't seem to stop. And yet, here was God's Word. "Put off anger." It was clear to me that this was not just some good advice given to the people at Colossi centuries ago. It was God speaking to me at the moment.

So that week I made a covenant with God. He had spoken to me about my sin of anger, and I promised the Lord I was going to work on it. My first step was to memorize the verse and review it daily for a number of weeks. I prayed and asked the Lord to bring this verse to mind whenever a situation arose where I might be tempted to lose my temper. And I asked my wife to pray for me and remind me of that passage



if she saw me failing in my promise to the Lord. So, Colossians 3:8 became a part of my life, and gradually God removed that sin from me.

You have to believe that what God advises you to do is good for you. Don't pass over an uncomfortable verse and go on to the next one saying, "Oh, I like this one." No, if God says, "No more drinking at the cup of anger," believe him. It's good advice. Now that doesn't solve the whole problem, but it's step number one.

**[Q]** Why is believing that God is good essential to trusting him with wrongs done to you?

- Do you believe God is always good? Why or why not?

**[Q]** Colossians 3:8 mentions anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. What do all those have in common?

- Have you successfully gotten rid of any of these? How?

### Teaching point three: Cherish being forgiven by God.

Read Ephesians 4:32.

Being forgiven by God will have an amazing impact on your capacity to forgive other people.

What about the person who believes they are forgiven by God but justifies holding a grudge? The problem is this: Defining saving faith as the simple belief in your head that God forgave you is wrong. That's not the definition of saving faith. All kinds of people can be deluded into thinking they've been forgiven by God for all kinds of wrong reasons.

What is saving faith then? Saving faith is believing that being forgiven by God is an awesome thing. Saving faith is looking at the holiness of God, looking at the horror of my sin, and being staggered by the thought that I am forgiven. Not just the simple conviction in the head that my sins are forgiven because Jesus died for me. That's not saving faith. You can go right on cruising in your life of unforgiveness, holding a grudge, and justifying it by believing you're forgiven. If being forgiven does not stun you, then you don't cherish being forgiven.

Faith is a union with Christ that overwhelms you with the impossible thought that you can be forgiven by a holy God. And when you're ravaged by it, when you look at the forgiveness of God toward you and it staggers you, stuns you, silences you, awes you, wraps you up—then it becomes a psychological impossibility to turn toward those who have wronged you and say, "But I'm not going to pass it on to you." You can't do it. It is impossible to cherish the beauty of being forgiven and then not to share it with those who've wronged you. There is a link. The battle against bitterness is the battle against unbelief, but belief is not a mere head conviction that Christ forgave you. It's a heart conviction that this forgiveness is the most awesome thing you've ever experienced.

**[Q]** Explain why saving faith is more than simple intellectual assent.

**[Q]** When have you been overwhelmed by the goodness of God's forgiveness of your sins? Tell us about it.

- What did that realization do to the way you looked at others' sins?

**[Q]** What are you really saying to God if you refuse to forgive others?



### Teaching point four: Trust that God's justice will prevail.

All of us know from experience that one of the causes of bitterness is being wronged, really wronged, by somebody. "They lied about us. They stole from us. They were unfaithful to us. They let us down. They rejected us." And we feel not only that it shouldn't have happened to us—we didn't do anything to deserve it—but that they should be punished. And you know what? You're right, and it's precisely the rightness of it that chews away at you inside and can destroy you.

What do you do in a situation like that, when you're right? Read Romans 12:19–21.

God has promised that he will repay those who have wronged you. His justice will prevail.

No wrong ever committed against you, not in the darkest hour of any night, has ever been missed. God knows every wrong committed against you. He sees the evil of the wrong far better than you do. He hates the evil of the wrong 10,000 times more purely and righteously than you hate it. He claims the right to settle accounts for you. And the big issue then is: do you believe he will? Do you trust him when the wrong comes and all your moral indignation rightly cries out? Are you willing to believe God's promise instead of letting your anger fester, seethe, and chew at your insides?

God says: I saw it. You're right. They're wrong. I hate what they did to you. You give me that anger. I'm going to settle this for you, and I will settle it better than you could ever settle it. Justice will prevail. Do you trust me?

What do you do with your anger? You do what Jesus did. Have you ever considered how Jesus was ripped off? Nobody in this world has ever been wronged as Jesus was. Nobody has ever gotten such a raw deal. Nobody has ever been abused more than Jesus was abused. Nobody has ever been rejected more deeply than Jesus was rejected. And nobody was more innocent and undeserving of it all than Jesus.

So how did Jesus respond? Did he just say: Oh, it doesn't matter. I don't feel anything.

No. Jesus felt it all. He felt every bit as much pain as you've ever felt, and he was angry. He hates sin. But what did he do with it? Read 1 Peter 2:23.

Why did he do that? Why did he take all the righteous and moral indignation that came up in his heart, and instead of keeping it inside and seething and lashing out with it, emptied it into the hands of the Righteous Judge? He did it because he had become one of us—weak, human, and frail—and he wanted to set an example of what we should do with it: hand it over to the just Judge.

If you hold a grudge, you slight the Judge.

**[Q]** Why is it faithless to hold a grudge? What are you really saying to God?

**[Q]** What does it mean in practical terms to turn your anger over to the just Judge?

**[Q]** Will that justice happen on earth, or do we have to wait until heaven? When did the disciples receive justice?

#### **Optional Activity**

**Purpose:** *To help us let God be our avenger.*



**Activity:** Provide everyone with pen and paper. Ask them to write down any hurts they are harboring from the past or present. When they are finished, ask them to silently read Romans 12:19–21 and to give that hurt to God, trusting him to be their avenger.

PART 3

## Apply Your Findings

The way to battle unbelief and bitterness is to trust God's purpose and ability to use the cause of your anger for your good. Read 1 Peter 1:6–7.

God allows trials to come into your life. Now, a trial is anything that tends to make you angry. If it didn't make you angry it wouldn't be a trial. So these trials are allowed, it says, to treat your faith like a refiner treats gold. What God is after in your life, more than anything else, is genuine faith. The faith in our lives is sullied. It's got dross in the metal. Therefore, God allows us to be put in a crucible.

When you heat a crucible, the metal pops inside it. At that moment you've got a choice of faith. Will you give way to unbelief and shake your fist and say, "I didn't deserve this, and I won't tolerate it"? Or will you yield to God's wisdom, promise, and fairness?

**Action Point:** Is there someone you have failed to forgive? If so, ask the group to pray that you will be able to trust the good, wise, and perfect Judge to make things right.

—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon



# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 4

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

### God Is Our Avenger

*We overcome the dangers of anger by allowing God to be our avenger.*

Many people hide their anger by keeping up a good front. The trouble is that anger that is kept corked inside ferments. Other people blow off steam as soon as anything happens to them. Still others turn red in the face and grip the edge of the chair as their knuckles turn white. Some become sullen and quiet and slink out of sight. Others become caustic and cutting with their tongue. Whatever way you handle or respond to anger, it's a universal experience. Everybody has to learn to deal with it one way or another.

**Scripture:**

Romans 12:19

**Based on:**

The sermon "Battling the Unbelief of Bitterness," by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)



**PART 1**

## **Identify the Current Issue**

The Bible warns us about the dangers of anger: Be slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.

In other words, be slow to anger because most of our anger is a lot of man and very little of God. Such anger does nobody any good and brings no glory to God.

**PART 2**

## **Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: Our anger and failure to forgive are actually expressions of unbelief.**

**Teaching point two: Believe that God is good and has your best in mind.**

**Teaching point three: Cherish being forgiven by God.**

**Teaching point four: Trust that God's justice will prevail.**

**PART 3**

## **Apply Your Findings**

God allows trials to come into your life. Now, a trial is anything that tends to make you angry. If it didn't make you angry it wouldn't be a trial. What's to be tried? So these trials are allowed, it says, to treat your faith like a refiner treats gold. What God is after in your life, more than anything else, is genuine faith. The faith in our lives is sullied. It's got dross in the metal. Therefore, God allows us to be put in a crucible.

When you heat a crucible, the metal pops inside it. At that moment you've got a choice of faith. Will you give way to unbelief and shake your fist and say, "I didn't deserve this, and I won't tolerate it"? Or will you yield to God's wisdom, promise, and fairness?

*—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon*



# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 5

LEADER'S GUIDE

### God Is Our Joy

*When we find our joy in Christ, we can sacrifice for others.*

Hebrews 10:24–25 reminds us that we Christians should gather together regularly to consider each other—our weaknesses and potential, our strengths and our peculiarities—so that we may encourage one another to love and good works. Without that kind of regular exhortation, we will all drift back into apathy. We will come to love, expect, and depend on more and more comforts, ease, and security—all of which get in the way of love. But how can we continue to want to love and sacrifice for each other? Only by allowing Christ to be our joy.

**Scripture:**

Hebrews 10:32–39

**Based on:**

The sermon "The Present Power of a Future Possession," by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)



PART 1

## Identify the Current Issue

*Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

Read Hebrews 10:32–39.

What makes us willing to serve the needy? What will keep us from running from suffering? Whether it's cancer in our midst, a broken marriage, depression, a lonely person, or refugees in Africa, who are the people who don't retreat into the TV room but do something that's costly? Where do people like that come from? How are they created and sustained over the long haul? That's what this text is about.

Now, imagine that half of your small group went to jail, and the other half prayed and decided to take a stand and visit the prisoners. While they were gone, people wrote, "Christians get out!" all over their houses and burned their furniture in the streets. When they came home to that, they gathered the small group in a circle and sang a song of joy that they had been counted worthy of such abuse for the sake of the Name (Acts 5:41). The author of Hebrews says that is how they responded: "You joyfully accepted the seizure of your property knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one."

These people are my heroes. I love this text. I want to be like this. Don't you? Don't you want to be free from your love of things? What's the key? How do we become like this?

The key word is *joyfully*. They joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property. So many of us love safety, comfort, ease, and fun, and if anybody gets in the way of that, we murmur, murmur, murmur. Why aren't these people like that? What planet did they come to this selfish Earth from? Look again at verse 34.

When you know that you have a better and lasting possession, you are not paralyzed by loss. Evidently, there must be a possession that is so much better and long lasting that if you have it, and you lose something in the name of it, that's okay.

### Discussion Questions:

[Q] How would you define joy?

[Q] Why does an attitude of joy change our perspective about hardship?

[Q] What causes a person to be joyful?

### Optional Activity

**Purpose:** To help us evaluate our motivation in life.

**Activity:** Provide everyone with pen and paper. Ask them to write down five things they would most like to accomplish in their lifetime.

When they are finished, ask them whether they think each of those things is rooted in God as their joy and motivation. Discuss as a group what makes each thing so rooted or not.



PART 2

## Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching point one: God is our treasure and our joy.

So what is this possession that is worth the loss of everything? The Book of Hebrews tells us. It's the triumph over death (2:14–15). It's the final rest for the saints (4:9). It's the subduing of all of our enemies by Christ (10:13). It's the acceptance we enjoy by the one sacrifice, Jesus Christ, that draws us near to God forever. That's the new covenant. "I will be among them. They will be my people. I will be their God forever." That's our treasure, our possession—God, our God, our portion, our Savior, our refuge, our hope, our King.

A better possession and an abiding one is not a thing. Don't ever try to get your hope from a thing in heaven, or from a gift instead of the giver. Our true possession is fellowship with God. It's being accepted, loved, and embraced by God our Father. Look again at Hebrews 10:34 and read Psalm 16:11.

In God's presence is "fullness of joy" and "pleasures forever." That's lasting. What's the reward? It's God.

So, what is the key to being loving, to going to the prison or the refugees or the person to whom you don't know what to say because their marriage is so broken? The key to doing it even when you don't know how is indomitable joy, rooted in knowing we have a better and abiding possession that is awesomely satisfying, and in being so completely sure that come what may, we are loved.

**[Q]** What is the difference between drawing hope from the things we will have in heaven, and drawing hope from the One we will have in heaven?

**[Q]** Have you ever experienced "fullness of joy" in God's presence? If so, tell us about it.

**[Q]** How does being secure in God's love help us to love others?

**[Q]** Do you see God as full of joy? If not, what has warped your view of him?

- If God is joyful, how can we learn to absorb that joy, too?

### Teaching point two: Have confidence in God.

Look again at Hebrews 10:34. These Christians *knew*. They didn't say, "Maybe there's something after the grave." You won't love long like that, or be willing to risk it all in dangerous situations. You will live selfishly because this might be the end of the line. If you don't get as many toys as you can have in this life, then you blew it.

You have to know that we are only passing through this life. It is two seconds, a vapor's breath, and then eternal joy. If you truly believe that, you will be one great risk taker. So how do you know? That's what the Book is for—and not just Hebrews, but this whole Book. Read Romans 15:4.

Christianity is all about freeing you to take risks by putting a massive, unshakable hope under your life—hope in a better and lasting possession. So, in Hebrews, it's Christ. It's all Christ. Christ is the one who, through his death and resurrection, destroyed the powers of death. He



became the high priest who opens the way to the throne of grace. He ever lives to make intercession for us. His blood cleanses my dirty conscience so that I can approach the living God, clean in his righteousness. He obtained an eternal redemption, and he perfects us for all time. He makes all of our enemies a footstool for his feet. He's coming again to save those who are eagerly waiting for him, and he's become the mediator of this glorious covenant—which means our sins are forgiven, the law is written on our hearts, and God is our God. It is all Christ.

If you say, “How can we know?” It's Christ. Christ is the foundation of your knowing. He's done it all. You can't earn this possession. Christ bought it. He has it in his hands. Free. There's only one way you can get it. Love it. Want it. The cost of food in the kingdom is hunger for the bread of heaven instead of the white bread of the world. Pray that God would waken hunger in you.

Knowing that we have a better possession and an abiding one yields an indomitable joy—joy that satisfies the heart and releases us from being enslaved to ease, comfort, and security so that we can help others. What are the practical implications for us? In our small groups and in our families and among friends, we must do two things for each other. We must continually warn each other of the incredibly high price of throwing away our confidence in this possession. And we must continually direct each other's attentions and affections toward the superior value and preciousness of the promises of God. Those are the two things we must do for each other over and over again.

- [Q] How might failure to have confidence in God cause us to live selfishly?
- [Q] What are some practical ways we can warn each other away from spending our lives in meaningless accumulation and direct each other to the promises of God?
- [Q] Why does lack of confidence in God sap us of will and power?
- [Q] What do you think it means that “the cost of food in the kingdom is hunger”? What is that hunger like and how do we gain it?
- [Q] Look again at Hebrews 10:38–39. What does it mean to live by faith?
  - There is both a strong warning and a strong reassurance in these verses. What are they, and what do they mean?

**Leader's Note:** *The warning is that if we shrink back, we will be destroyed. The reassurance is that the writer of Hebrews assumes his audience is not that kind of person, according to verse 39. Don't blow this warning off as though what is at stake are just a few more rewards in heaven. No. What's at stake is hell. When God says, “I have no pleasure in you,” and when it says those who shrink back are destroyed, he is talking about hell, not loss of reward. Therefore, we say to one another: I don't care how many decisions you made for him in the past; I don't care if you've served as an elder or a deacon or given \$10,000 a year to this church for 20 years—if you're on a trajectory away from God, embracing sin as your portion and renouncing what God stands for, you're on your way to destruction. Turn, turn, turn! That's what we must say to each other. There are no flippant guarantees of security because of past decisions. The evidence of being born of God is that you don't turn away and forsake him.*



PART 3

## Apply Your Findings

The majority of our time has to be devoted to telling each other the positive, namely Hebrews 10:35: “Do not throw away your confidence which has great reward.” This is what we are to talk, write, and sing about. He is worthy. We need to find ways of telling one another, “Look, the reward is so great; don’t throw this away.”

We want to say to people, “Please don’t commit eternal suicide. Wake up. God is so much better than these toys! Come on! Wake up! Wake up!” That’s why we’re in small groups, that’s why we come to church, that’s the meaning of preaching, that’s the meaning of Sunday school, that’s the meaning of everything—to help one another wake up to God in his infinite superiority over everything. God is our joy.

**Action Points:** Close by reading together Psalm 150, speaking with feeling—as if you mean it.

What are some practical ways you can talk, write, and sing about God as your joy? Pick the means you enjoy most and express your joy to God this week by talking, writing, or singing about him to someone else.

—Study by John Piper, with JoHannah Reardon



# Great Teachers

of the Bible

## John Piper on the Nature of God - Study 5

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

### God Is Our Joy

*When we find our joy in Christ, we can sacrifice for others.*

Hebrews 10:24–25 reminds us that we Christians should gather together regularly to consider each other—our weaknesses and potential, our strengths and our peculiarities—so that we may encourage one another to love and good works. Without that kind of regular exhortation, we will all drift back into apathy. We will come to love, expect, and depend on more and more comforts, ease, and security—all of which get in the way of love. But how can we continue to want to love and sacrifice for each other? Only by allowing Christ to be our joy.

**Scripture:**

Hebrews 10:32–39

**Based on:**

The sermon "The Present Power of a Future Possession," by John Piper, [PreachingToday.com](http://PreachingToday.com)



**PART 1**

## **Identify the Current Issue**

What makes us willing to serve the needy? What will keep us from running from suffering? Whether it's cancer in our midst, a broken marriage, depression, a lonely person, or refugees in Africa, who are the people who don't retreat into the TV room but do something that's costly? Where do people like that come from? How are they created and sustained over the long haul? That's what this text is about.

**PART 2**

## **Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching point one: God is our treasure and our joy.**

**Teaching point two: Have confidence in God.**

**PART 3**

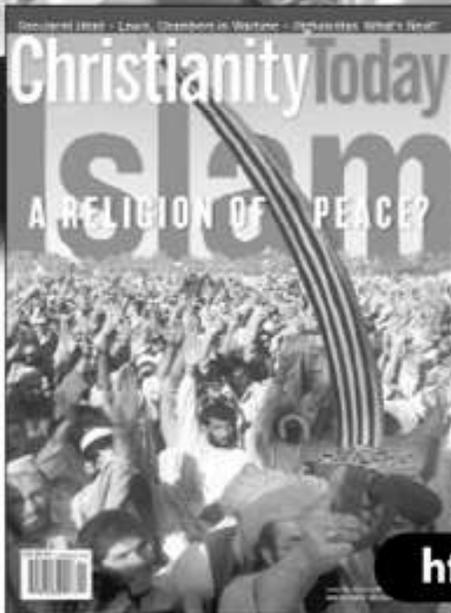
## **Apply Your Findings**

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# UNDERSTAND THE WORLD



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