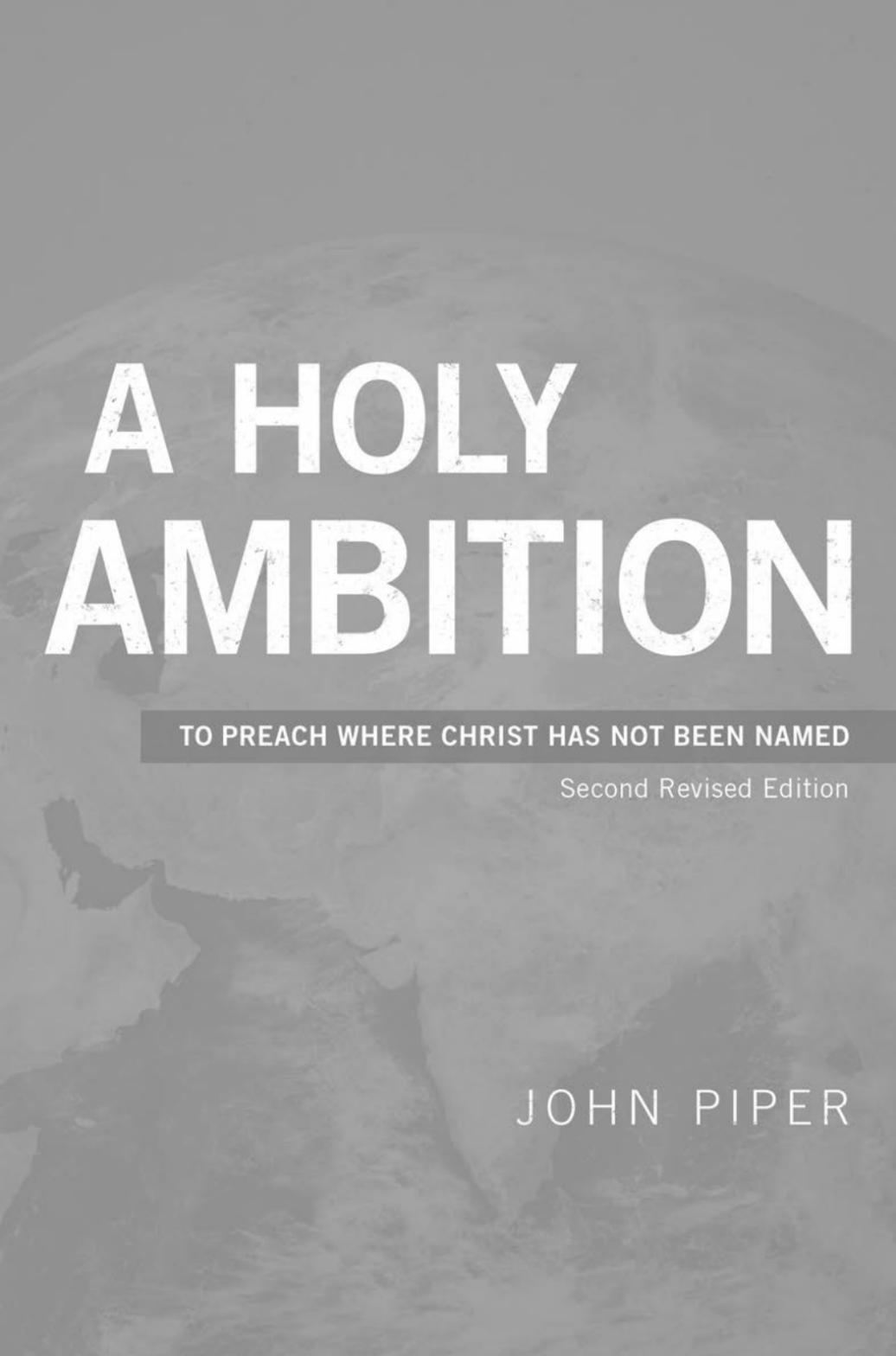
The background of the entire cover is a red-tinted image of the Earth, showing the continents and oceans. The color is a deep, vibrant red, creating a strong visual impact.

A HOLY AMBITION

TO PREACH WHERE CHRIST HAS NOT BEEN NAMED

Second Revised Edition

JOHN PIPER



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Preface

The title of this book comes from the apostle Paul. It has a special significance for me, because he was not young when he burned with his “holy ambition.” I am not young. But my heart burns at age 73 with the ambition of pursuing God’s global glory. For whatever time I have left, I want my life to count for the gladness of the nations in the glory of Christ. I hope this book makes your heart burn in the same way.

Paul said, “I make it my *ambition* to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named” (Romans 15:20). That’s the heart of a missionary talking—a person whose calling is to herald the good news of Christ in places where people have no access to the gospel.

To be sure, there is always more great gospel work to be done in every church and every neighborhood in every nation of the world. Most Christians are meant to give their lives to this glorious work of shining with the light of

Christ in places already touched with the gospel. We know this because, when Paul told the Roman church about his ambition to go to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28), he did not invite the whole church to leave Rome and go with him.

Nevertheless, my prayer is that God would ignite a flame in some believers in every Christian church around the world—a *holy ambition* to pick up Paul's mantle, and take the gospel where it has never gone. We are publishing this revised edition of *A Holy Ambition* as one piece of kindling to throw on that flame.

In this edition, we have added four chapters of new material. We removed about a third of the original content, and freshly edited and organized the remainder. It's been eight years since the first edition appeared. Since then, my thirty-three-year pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church has come to an end. God designed and performed a beautiful transition for the church into new leadership.

But in this new chapter of life, as I work full-time for Desiring God and Bethlehem College & Seminary, the cause of world missions remains prominent. I have been able to travel internationally more than I used to, as we try to serve newer movements of gospel growth. And to my amazement, God gave me the privilege of being part of starting the CROSS missions conference for students.

This conference has grown from its first gathering in 2013, to 7,000 attenders in 2018. It is rooted in the conviction that people perish eternally if they do not hear and believe the good news of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners. It foregrounds the essential role of the local church. It stresses the truth that not every Christian is a missionary, but that missions is a special cross-cultural calling. It exults in the sovereignty of God's grace in

raising to life people from every ethnicity who are spiritually dead. And it waves the flag that Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering.

I mention the CROSS conference mainly to illustrate that God is willing to fulfill an old man's holy ambition. I stand amazed that I have been granted the privilege of joining with others in launching thousands of Christians into cross-cultural missions. If you are reading this book, you are not too young, or too old, to dream a new gospel dream.

I say this with the confidence that God can make your holy ambition clear to you. The reason for that confidence is that, when Paul wanted to explain his confidence in his holy ambition, he did not refer to his unrepeatable encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road. He referred to his eminently repeatable encounter with God's word in the Bible. In Romans 15:21, he explained his confidence with Isaiah 52:15,

Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.

God warranted and clarified Paul's holy ambition with the Scriptures. He can do the same for you. I pray that this will happen as you read these chapters, which are saturated with God's word.

John Piper
Senior Teacher and Founder, Desiring God
Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary

ROMANS 15:18-24

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed,¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation,²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."²² This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you,²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Introduction

A Holy Ambition: To Preach Where Christ Has Not Been Named

Let's focus on three parts of this Romans 15 text. All three have direct implications for your life (even if you are currently not aware of them), and all of them relate directly to God and his purposes in the twenty-first century. I see, first, a holy ambition; second, an immeasurable need; third, a global strategy. Let's take these one at a time and see how they relate to each other and to us and to our world today.

A Holy Ambition

Romans 15:20 reads, "And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation."

Paul was controlled by a holy ambition: He says in verse 22, "This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you." And he says at the end of verse 23, "I have longed for many years to come to you."

When you long to do something for years and years, but you don't do it, something or someone must be controlling you to the contrary. What was controlling Paul and keeping him from going to Rome? He was not finished with his ambition in the regions from Jerusalem to Illyricum. But finally, he says in verse 23, "I no longer have any room for work in these regions." And then in verse 24, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain."

In other words, he was controlled by an ambition to preach the gospel to those who had not heard the name of Jesus from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern-day Albania), and he would not turn from this ambition until it was fulfilled. But now the work is done in those regions, and his ambition is taking him to Spain. That frees him finally to do what he has wanted to do for years—namely, visit the church in Rome and enjoy their company for a little while.

It is a good thing to be controlled by a holy ambition. Are you controlled by a holy ambition? I am calling it *holy* because its aim is holy—to see people from all the nations who have never heard of Jesus believe in him and become obedient to him and be saved by him from their sin and from God's wrath. I am also calling this ambition *holy* because it comes from the holy God and his holy word, as we will see in a few moments. It is right and it is good to be controlled by a holy ambition.

Do you have a holy ambition? Not everyone *should* have Paul's ambition. One plants, another waters (1 Corinthians 3:6–8). Each has his own gift (1 Corinthians 7:7). Each stands or falls before his own master (Romans 14:4). But I think God would be pleased if each of his children had a holy ambition.

Holy Ambition for Girls and Boys

Little children, listen to me carefully for a moment. I know the words *holy ambition* are unusual and you don't use them every day. *Holy ambition* means something you *really* want to do that God wants you to do. Something you want to do so much that doing it keeps you from doing other things that you also really like to do. Paul really wanted to go to Rome for years. But he didn't go because he wanted something else more. He wanted to preach the gospel in Asia and Greece, where people didn't know about Jesus. He really, really, really wanted to do this. We call that kind of desire an *ambition*. And we call it a *holy ambition* when it is something God wants you to do too.

Do you have one? Probably not yet. You're still a child. That's what you're supposed to be. But some day you won't be a child anymore. And one of the differences between being a child and growing up is that growing up as a Christian means you get a holy ambition.

Most little girls, my Talitha included, really want to have and play with dolls. That's a good thing. But the day is going to come, little girls, when you will put away the fun of playing with dolls and grow up into the even bigger, better joy of caring for real babies in the nursery. And maybe you will even lead a ministry someday of caring for hungry babies far away, or lonely babies who have no mommy or daddy. And for some of you, this will become a holy ambition. For others, your holy ambition will be something else.

And boys, listen. If you are like I was, what you really want is a ball, a truck, or a gun, and somebody to play with. I've never had a real gun (except a pellet rifle). But I shot a lot of bad guys with my Matt Dillon pistol and my Lucas

McCain-like circle-handled rifle. I loved playing football with my friends and digging roads across the street for my trucks and drawing my pistol so fast you couldn't see it. It was fun. And that was good.

But some day you won't be a little boy any more. And one of the differences between being a little boy and growing up is that growing up as a Christian means you get a holy ambition. And that means the fun of guns and trucks and balls gets small and the joy of fighting for justice and salvation gets big. Growing up means getting a holy ambition to wield the sword of the Spirit mightily and drive a truckload of love to the needy and kick Satan's rear end in the name of Jesus.

Moms and dads, single people, young and old, all Christians should have a holy ambition—something you really, really want to do for the glory of God. It is something that controls you. It helps you decide not to go to “Rome” yet. It gives eternal focus, organization, and passion to your life.

The Source of Holy Ambition

Where does it come from? A crucial part of the answer is given in the link between Romans 15, verses 20 and 21: “Thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but *as it is written*, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’”

Now here is the amazing and relevant thing about this for us. We know from Acts 9 and 22 and 26 that Paul was called by the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Jesus gave Paul his mission in Acts 26:17-18: “I am sending you

[to the nations] to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” So he got a calling straight from the risen, living, all-sovereign Jesus Christ to be a light to the Gentiles.

But that’s not what he says in Romans 15:21. He doesn’t say, “I have this ambition to be a light to the nations who don’t know Christ because Jesus called me on the Damascus road.” He says, in effect, “I have this ambition—I am controlled by a passion to preach where Christ has not been named—because Isaiah 52:15 says, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’”

What do you make of that? Here’s what I make of it. When Jesus called Paul on the Damascus road to take the gospel to the Gentiles who had never heard, Paul went to his Bible (what we today call the Old Testament) and looked for a confirmation and explanation of this calling to see how it fit into God’s overall plan. And he found it. And for our sake he speaks this way. He doesn’t refer just to his experience on the Damascus road, which we will never have. He refers to God’s written word, which we *do* have, and he roots his ambition there.

So my answer to the question, “Where does your holy ambition come from?” is this: it comes from a personal encounter with the living Christ (not necessarily as dramatic as the Damascus road), shaped and informed and empowered by the written word of God. As you meditate on the law of the Lord day and night (Psalm 1:2)—as you immerse yourself in God’s word—he comes and takes some truth of that word and burns it into your heart until

it becomes a holy ambition. If that hasn't happened yet, saturate yourself with the word of God and ask him for it.

An Immeasurable Need

God doesn't lead us into ambitions that are pointless—that you will regret at the end of your life. There is always a need to be met (not a need in God, but in the world) by a holy ambition. Holy ambitions are not about self-exaltation. They are always a form of love. They always meet someone's need.

Now what is the immeasurable need Paul refers to in this text? Look at verse 20: “Thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.” That means that Paul has set his face like flint to preach the gospel to people who have never heard of Christ. They don't even know his name.

Now here's the question: If these people don't even know Jesus's name, then are they responsible to believe on him for salvation? And if not, then wouldn't it be safer, for them, just to leave them in their ignorance and believe that God will have mercy on them and save them because they haven't heard of Jesus? Why, Paul, do you suffer so much to preach the gospel to people who have never heard the name of Jesus?

Paul gave the answer in Romans 1:18–23. Read it with me slowly and soberly and feel the weight of it the way Paul must have. These words are written about all those peoples and nations who have never heard the name of Jesus, and whom Paul is driving to reach with his holy ambition.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [Those are the fatal words that define the immeasurable need Paul sees; the nations who have never heard of Jesus will have no excuse at the judgment day.] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Paul says in Romans 2:12, "All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law." Everybody will be judged according to what they have access to. And everybody will perish who does not hear the gospel, because everybody suppresses the truth that they have and lives in rebellion against God. There is only one hope: hearing and believing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The need of the nations who do not know the name of Jesus is an immeasurable need. It is an infinite need. The greatest need that can be imagined is the need of

the nations to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and believe. Because the gospel of Jesus “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). And no one is saved without it.

Not every one of you is called to go like Paul. But you can't be a loving person and not want your life to count or contribute to the meeting of this great need.

A Global Strategy

But God is calling some of you to join Paul personally and vocationally in this particular global strategy. Here's the strategy. And it is amazing.

Here are Paul's amazing statements. First, verse 19: “From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.” That's from Jerusalem up through Syria, across Asia Minor (Turkey), down through Greece on the east side and up the west to northern Italy where Albania is today. Paul says he has fulfilled the gospel there. And he underlines that astonishing statement in verse 23 by saying, “I no longer have any room for work in these regions.” And then in verse 24 he says, “I go to Spain.”

What in the world did he mean that he had no room for work from Jerusalem to Illyricum? It is not a risk to say that there were tens of thousands of people yet to be evangelized in those regions. We know this because Paul writes to Timothy at Ephesus (in this very region) and commands him to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5). In other words, there are people who need to be evangelized. And Paul says his work is done in this region.

I take that to mean that Paul is not a local evangelist;

he's a frontier missionary, a pioneer missionary. That is, his calling and his ambition is not to do evangelism where the church has been planted. The church should do that. Paul's calling and his ambition is to preach the gospel where there is no evangelizing church. Where there are no Christians. Where they don't even know what a Christian is.

The label for the role is not what's crucial. What's crucial is the distinction. There are frontier (or pioneer) missionaries, and there are evangelists. Missionaries cross cultures and learn languages. And *frontier* missionaries pour out their lives "by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" (Romans 15:18–19) to break through thousands of years of darkness and the reign of Satan over a people who do not know the King of kings and the Savior of the world.

This was Paul's ambition. And since the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations is still valid, and there are peoples today who do not know the gospel, every church should pray that God would raise up many frontier missionaries and make all of us evangelists.

I can imagine—indeed, I pray—that ten years from now, someone will write a letter home from an unreached people and say, "I am here to speak the gospel to those who have never heard, for as it is written in Romans 15:20, 'I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation.' God burned that word onto my heart and turned it into a holy ambition."

Lord, please do that. Amen.

EPHESIANS 1:3-6

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

1

The Story of His Glory

Human beings, by nature, don't draw the same conclusions that God does from many facts, and in our human nature we don't feel the same way God does about the conclusions that he draws from the facts.

By *human nature* I mean a mind, an attitude, a bent that thinks badly about many things. "By nature [we are] children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). By our very nature, there is something wrong with us. We don't just do bad *things*; we have a bad *nature*, often doing terrible things with the abilities God has given us. Another text would be 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him."

If God says something strange, we don't like it. We, by nature, regard lots of things that are true as foolish. So there's something wrong with us: when God draws conclusions that look strange to us, we get in his face and we disagree with him and call him into question.

God's Motive for Missions

The older I get, the more I see evidences of this in me and in other Christians in the way we read our Bibles and in the way we respond to providences. For example, in order for us to have a heart for unreached peoples that is strong enough, deep enough, durable enough, God-centered enough, and Christ-exalting enough to be the kind of heart it should be, we need to base this heart for the nations on the same foundation on which God bases his heart for the nations. But when we see what God bases his heart for the nations on, many people start to get uncomfortable, because God bases his heart for the nations on *his passion for his own name and his own glory*.

I go all over the country and the world saying this, and then I watch the reactions and field the questions. I have discovered, for about thirty years now, that God's jealousy for his own name as he saves and judges the nations is alien to many believers, not to mention unbelievers. Since that is so alien to us, I want to build the case that God bases his heart for the nations on his heart for himself.

In doing that, I want to lay out texts, because what I think is of no consequence whatsoever if it doesn't correspond to biblical truth. The only thing you should care about is if what I say corresponds to what the Bible teaches. That's all that matters. My authority as a pastor isn't what counts, my being older than most readers isn't what counts, my having a certain level of education isn't what counts. What counts is this: Does this man get under the Bible instead of over the Bible? Does he submit and then talk plainly about what he finds here, in such a way

that ordinary folks can say, “Yes, that must be what it says and what it means, because there it is”?

God’s Ultimate Goal

God’s heart for the nations is built on God’s heart for God. God’s zeal to reach the nations with the glory of his Son and save sinners is built on his zeal that his name be exalted in and through the worshiping of Christ. That’s the argument. And the way to argue for it, I think, is to simply look at an array of texts that show that God does everything for the sake of magnifying his glory.

Here’s my thesis: God’s ultimate goal in creation and redemption is to uphold and display his glory for the enjoyment of his redeemed people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. God’s main goal, his ultimate goal, is to uphold and display his glory. That is the seemingly offensive thing to many people. It just sounds so self-centered and self-exalting to many people.

The key to why God’s self-exaltation—that is, the pursuit of the magnifying of his own glory—is not vicious but virtuous, not unloving but loving, is this word *enjoyment*. He is doing it for the enjoyment of his people. If God did not preserve and exalt his glory, we would not be given the very thing that we were designed to be most satisfied by—namely, God and his glory. He is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the highest virtue and the greatest act of love. When you stand in front of God, if you’re thinking God’s thoughts and not the world’s thoughts, what you want is for God to say, “Hey, stand in front of me and watch *this!*” And then you want him to be God, in the fullness of his grace and justice, so

that you can spend eternity enjoying him and going deeper into him.

Consider Isaiah 28:5: “In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people.” What will it mean that he will be a crown of glory? Whose head will it be on? He’s the crown. He is not the head. It’s going to be on your head. Take a deep breath. He will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty. In other words, he will satisfy every longing you have for glory and beauty. Everything good that you ever longed for will be satisfied in him.

Therefore, it is loving for him to lift himself up and say, “Here I am, world! Admire!” If you did that, you would be unloving, because you are not all-satisfying. He is. You should simply go all over the world pointing to him. Say, “World, look!” Look at Christ especially, because there, when Christ died, the glory of the grace of God was magnified, which is the apex of all his glory, which is why Christ is the center of everything.

To the Praise of His Glorious Grace

The texts we are going to look at will appear in chronological order. This first passage describes an event that was chronologically first in the universe—no, first in reality, even *before* the universe. Look at Ephesians 1.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of

the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3–6)

I'll paraphrase that: God, before the foundation of the world, set his heart on being praised. Choosing, predestining, adopting—these are all means to that ultimate goal. And the goal is, the purpose is, that we *praise his glorious grace*, which was supremely manifested in Jesus, and which was planned before the foundation of the world.

So there's my first argument: From the beginning, before we existed, God's design was to get praise for his glorious grace.

Images Are Created to Image

The next item in my chronology is creation.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Books by the hundreds have been written on the *imago dei*, as it's called. It's a huge issue. Is it our reason? Is it our

emotions? Is it that we have moral accountability? How are we like God?

I'm going to avoid the whole controversy and say something much simpler: images are created to image. Why do you ever set up an image of anything? To image it! If someone puts up a statue of Stalin, he wants people to look at Stalin and think about Stalin. If someone puts up a statue of George Washington, he wants people to look at it and think about the founding fathers. Images are made to image. So if God made us, unlike all the other animals, in his image, whatever it means in detail, this it means clearly: God is the reality, and we are the image. Images are created to set forth the reality.

Why did God create man? To show God! He created little images so that they would talk and act and feel in a way that reveals the way God is—so that people would look at the way you behave, the way you think, the way you feel, and say, “God must be great. God must be real.” *That* is why you exist. God didn't create you as an end in yourself. *He's* the end, and you're the means. And the reason that's such good news is because the best way to show that God is infinitely valuable is to be supremely happy in him. If God's people are bored with God, they are really bad images. God is not unhappy about himself. He is infinitely excited about his own glory.

That's why the Son received the words “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Take those words *well pleased*. God doesn't say he feels just okay about Jesus. He is absolutely thrilled with Jesus as the image of himself. So if we watch television, go on the computer, handle money, and use food in a way that communicates to the world that these things are our

treasure rather than God, that these things make us satisfied rather than God, then he's getting bad press and we're not doing what we were created to do. We were created to image God.

So, God predestined people *for* his glory, and he created people for the *display* of his glory.

God Acts for the Sake of His Name

Staying in chronological order, we'll now move to the exodus.

Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob, making myself known to them in the land of Egypt; I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. ⁶On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. ⁷And I said to them, 'Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.'⁸ But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. ⁹But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight

of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. (Ezekiel 20:5–9)

Here we begin to see something that's going to climax in the cross of Christ—namely, the ground of the deliverance of a rebellious people is God's jealousy for his name. If God, at this point, had not been supremely jealous for his name, wrath would have fallen upon the people of Israel: "Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt" (v. 8).

That's what they deserved. But something checked that just disposition in God: "But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt" (v. 9).

To Make Known His Mighty Power

Get that principle. There are so many Christians today who see the salvation of God as an evidence of their worth instead of God's worth. That doesn't work here. It just doesn't work. When they walked through the sea on dry land, what should they say? "We must be really good!" No! They deserved wrath, and they got deliverance because God is really great, and he means to be known as great.

Here is the way Psalm 106:6–8 puts it:

Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness. Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not

consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power.

Oh, how thankful I am for worship leaders who get this, who are constantly saying, "We're going to glory in our Redeemer!" We're not going to glory in the fact that God's saving me must mean I am glorious. We're not going to talk like that. That doesn't satisfy the soul. That's the carnal mind using the cross to buttress its ego. There are many people who do that, but the cross crucifies the ego and puts all worth on Jesus and the Father.

Why Ten Plagues?

Now to the book of Exodus itself. God says, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 14:4).

Have you ever asked why God used ten plagues to deliver Israel from Egypt instead of one? If you thought like the world, you might think, "Well, he did his best for nine, and then he really pulled the trump card at ten and it worked." That's not the case, because we read at the beginning of the story that he was going to multiply his signs in Egypt (Exodus 7:3-4). God *planned* to multiply his signs in Egypt. Why? Because he meant to get glory over Pharaoh, who was so against God. He meant to magnify himself. The exodus, which is a pointer to our exodus from sin, was based upon God's zeal for his name.

Healthy Jealousy

A few months after the exodus came the giving of the law.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me. (Exodus 20:3–5)

Have no gods before me because I'm jealous, God says. What does *jealous* mean here? There is some jealousy that is bad, and there is some jealousy that is good. I just did some premarital counseling recently, and I looked at some personality things that I saw, and I queried them about how he would feel if she spent time with her female friends after they were married, and he with his male friends, and other things. I probed because I was scratching for unhealthy jealousy: "You're mine! You be home every night! You give everything to me!" Now, that would be unhealthy jealousy.

There is, however, a very healthy jealousy. If Noël decides she's interested in another man, if she starts hanging out for long hours at Starbucks with him, having deep conversations about her heart, and gets further and further from my heart, I should be really angry. And God is really angry when we hang out in inappropriate ways with the world. Why? Because we're designed to bestow

all the glory on him, to get our deepest and most profound satisfaction from him. He is intending to say in the law, “I’m number one—period. And you’ll be destroyed if you don’t agree.” Now that kind of talk really turns people off. But you need to say it like that just to wake some people up to how carnal and self-centered they are. That’s the law.

Mercy in the Wilderness

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness a long time. Why? Why did he spare them? These were really, really rebellious folks, just like we are apart from God.

But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned. Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them in the wilderness, to make a full end of them. But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. (Ezekiel 20:13-14)

We’ve seen that before. It happens over and over again in the history of Israel.

Gospel before the Gospel

We will skip the conquest of Canaan and move to the Israelites asking for a king. I love this passage because it is so full of gospel before the gospel. We saw the gospel in the exodus, that the salvation of a rebellious people was

rooted not in their worth, but in God's worth. And here we're going to see it again. The people have asked to have a king like the nations, and Samuel's not happy about that, and God's angry about that. So, what happens?

And all the people said to Samuel, "Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king." And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil." (1 Samuel 12:19–20)

I don't remember how many years ago it was, but there was a point where I read this and I thought, that is a very strange connection. The connection between "fear not" and "you have done all this evil" is really weird. It should be, "Fear! You have done all this evil. Fear!" But it says, "Fear not; you have done all this evil." That's what I mean by *gospel*. This is undeserved grace, undeserved mercy. Why? What's the basis of it?

Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty. For the LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake. (1 Samuel 12:20–22)

So in the exodus, the people were delivered and not shown wrath because God was jealous for his name in Egypt. Here, the people have committed treason and impeached God and essentially said, "We want another kind of king. We want to be like the nations. We don't like this theoc-

racy business. We want another king.” Later, they called it sin, and Samuel preached to them and told them not to be afraid. Samuel could have said, “Don’t be afraid because God is merciful, God is gracious, God keeps covenant love.” He could have said all these things and they would be true, but instead, he said, “The Lord will not cast away his people for his great name’s sake.”

How Do You Pray?

How do you pray in response to that?

I remember being at Fuller Seminary in the spring of 1969, when my world was being blown to smithereens. I went through Copernican revolutions, because when you’ve been man-centered all your life, all the stars must come crashing down in order to rebuild your world. Noël and I had just gotten married in December of 1968, so she was walking through this with me.

Every night as a young couple, we knelt by the beige couch in the living room of that little house on Orange Grove Boulevard and prayed. I remember saying to Noël, “You know, you can tell when somebody’s theology is being turned upside down by the way they pray.” Because we just were praying differently. Texts like “Hallowed be thy name” were just exploding. That wasn’t a throwaway phrase anymore! “Hallowed be your name” was a request to God to make himself strong in the world and great in our hearts. So I’m asking you: how does your discovery of God affect your praying?

Here’s one way: “*For thy name’s sake*, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great” (Psalm 25:11). Do you pray that way? Does that kind of thinking come to your mind? It

sure didn't come to my mind until I had my eyes open to texts, hundreds of them, like that.

We do say this now, just in different words. We say, "In Jesus's name I pray, amen." Because on this side of the cross, we know *the name*—it's Jesus. God has put his Son forward to exalt his own righteousness and preserve his own justice in the saving of sinners. So when we call down mercy, totally undeserved, whom are we going to appeal to? Ourselves? Nothing works except this: "For your name's sake, O Lord, make your name great in forgiving my sins and using me, broken and imperfect as I am."

Or how about this prayer: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:3). Why does he sanctify you, leading you in paths of righteousness? Well consider how you might pray in response to that verse. "Lord, lead me in paths of righteousness *for your name's sake* today—I want you to *look great* today."

Brokenness before Joy

Noël and I had a rocking chair that I bought for her when we had our first baby in Germany. I sat in that chair every Sunday night. There were no Sunday-evening events in Germany, and for about a year I read *Religious Affections* by Jonathan Edwards. I read two or three pages a night—I could not take much of that book. It was absolutely convicting.

Ezekiel 36 jumped off the page in Edwards's section on what he called evangelical humiliation.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of

Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel. (Ezekiel 36:22–23, 32)

The reason that blew me away in 1972 is because I was surrounded by books on self-esteem. And as I read Ezekiel 36, I thought, *None of those books would ever quote this text. They would never, ever, ever say, "It is not for your sake I will act, says the Lord; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your sins, O house of Israel."*

We must feel genuine, devastating brokenness before we leap for joy at the cross. The cross first says, "It is because of you that I am here. Your sin is so horrible it requires the death of the Son of God for God to be vindicated in the saving of your soul."

Jesus Glorifies the Father

We see the same thing in the New Testament. Jesus says, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

In accomplishing the work that Jesus received from the Father, he was glorifying the Father. And in John 7:18

Jesus says, “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.” God sent Jesus to get glory for God! That’s why he sent him.

In Romans 15:8–9, Paul says, “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

The reason God sent Jesus was so the Gentiles would glorify God for his mercy.

What does that little preposition *for* mean there: “glorify God *for* his mercy”? Wouldn’t you paraphrase that, “glorify God *on the basis of* his mercy”? That is, the experience of mercy prompts the glorifying of God *for* the mercy. God gets the glory, we get the mercy, and that’s the best of all possible worlds. I wouldn’t want it any other way. The natural mind says, “No, I really can’t be happy unless I get the glory, and I don’t like a God who doesn’t need a little bit of mercy.” I sometimes hear people talk about “forgiving God.” I’ve got to watch my language when I hear things like that.

How God Justifies Sinners

Romans contains the most important paragraph in the Bible, probably. It’s dangerous to say things like that, but if I had to choose, it would be somewhere in Romans 8 or somewhere in Romans 3.

In Romans 3, Paul sets up the issue of human sin in terms of glory: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Back in Romans 1, we read that we

have all exchanged the glory of God for images, especially the one in the mirror. Romans 1:23 says, “[We] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

Then in Romans 3:23, Paul says, “All have sinned and *fall short*,” which literally means *lack*. We lack because we have traded the glory of God for lesser things. We have turned away from it and embraced our favorite glory. *All have sinned*, and that’s what sin is. Preferring another glory to God’s glory is what sin is. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.

Now here is how God justifies sinners:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23–26)

If God passes over sins in the Old Testament and in your life—if he just passes them over—what does it look like? Sins belittle the glory of God, making his glory of little value. How then can God be righteous and forgive you? And the answer is that he killed his Son to show how serious sin is. He bruised his Son in order to magnify the worth of his glory.

Everything in redemptive history has been God acting for his glory; therefore, everything in your life is to

join him in that purpose. The reason you're on the planet is to join God in making much of God. Every human being that you'll ever meet, anywhere in the world, in any culture, according to Romans 5, is disobedient and rebellious and needs to be justified by faith alone. They've all stopped glorifying God for who he really is, and we go to call them back to glorify God.

Why Is Jesus Coming Back?

Let's jump all the way to the end now, to the second coming. Why is Jesus coming back?

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:9–10)

Second Thessalonians 1 gives us two reasons why the Son of God is returning to earth: to be glorified and to be marveled at. I never thought that for the first twenty-two years of my life. If anybody had asked me why Jesus is coming back, I'd have said, "He's coming back to get me—to save me." And that's true; it's just skewed. I was ignorant. My mind was not his mind. My thoughts were not his thoughts. They weren't based on what God's thoughts are based on. The Son of God is coming to be glorified, and the reason this is love is because your joy at that moment will consist in making much of him!

Admiring the Most Admirable

Ayn Rand, the atheistic philosopher novelist, said in *Atlas Shrugged*: “Admiration is the rarest of pleasures.” Now, in her mouth, that was absolutely scornful, meaning, “There aren’t any admirable people in the world except me and a few philosopher-business types.” But in my mouth it means that, unlike all other creatures, as a human, I am made to be one who admires. And my deepest joy will consist in admiring the most admirable. And there is only one who is most admirable: Christ, the complete image of God. And when he comes, my fullest joy will consist in fulfilling the purpose for which he came—namely, to be admired. So his glory and my joy come together.

Now, if you embrace this, then you will know why Jesus came to purchase people from every ethnic group, and why the church sends out missionaries. It’s all *for the sake of God’s name*. If we want our heart for the nations to rest upon God’s heart for the nations, it should rest upon the *basis* of God’s heart for the nations—namely, God’s heart for his own glory.

COLOSSIANS 1:24-26

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

2

Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain

My mission statement in life—and the mission statement of the church I served for thirty three years, from 1980 to 2013—is “we exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.”

I love that mission statement for several reasons. One is because I know it cannot fail. I know it cannot fail because it’s a promise from Jesus. “This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). *Nations* in that verse does not refer to political states. It refers to something like what we call *people groups*, ethnolinguistic groupings, and we may be absolutely certain that every one of them will be penetrated by the gospel, and they will be gathered with God’s global people in the new heavens and new earth.

The Promise Is Sure

Let me give you four reasons why we can bank on that.

1. Jesus never lies.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Matthew 24:35)

Because Jesus spoke these words, this mission called *world evangelization* is going to be completed. It's going to be done, and you can either get on board and enjoy the triumph, or you can cop out and waste your life. You have only those two choices, because there is no middle option like, "Maybe it won't succeed, and I can be on the best side by not jumping on board." That won't happen.

2. The ransom has already been paid for God's people among all the nations.

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. (Revelation 5:9–10)

These people have been ransomed, paid for, and God will not go back on his Son's payment.

I love the story of the Moravians. In northern Germany, two of them were getting on a boat, ready to sell themselves into slavery in the West Indies, if necessary, never to come back again. And as the boat drifts out into the harbor they lift their hands and say, "May the Lamb receive the reward of his suffering." What they meant was

that Christ had already bought those people. And they were going to find them. They would go preaching the gospel to everyone they could, and trusting God to call the ransomed to himself.

We know God's global mission can't abort because the debt has been paid for each of God's people everywhere in the world. Those lost sheep, as Jesus called them, that are scattered throughout the world, will come in as the Father calls them through the preaching of the gospel (John 11:51–52).

3. The glory of God is at stake.

Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. (Romans 15:8–9).

The whole purpose of the incarnation was to bring glory to the Father through the manifestation of his mercy to the nations.

The glory of God is at stake in the Great Commission. In 1983 at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Tom Steller—my partner in ministry for thirty-three years at the church—and I were both met by God in amazing ways. Tom, in the middle of the night, couldn't sleep, so he got up, put on a John Michael Talbot album, lay down on the couch, and heard our theology translated into missions. We had been a glory-of-God-oriented leadership, but we had not yet made sense of missions like we ought. John Michael Talbot was singing about the glory of God filling the earth the way the waters cover the sea, and Tom wept for an hour.

At the same time, God was moving on my wife, Noël,

and me to ask, “What can we do to make our church a launching pad for missions?” Everything came together to make an electric moment in the life of our church, and it all flowed from a passion for the glory of God.

4. God is sovereign.

Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity. . . . And this we will do if God permits. (Hebrews 6:1, 3)

In the late 1990s, as I was preaching sequentially through Hebrews, we arrived at Hebrews 6—a very difficult text about whether people who fall away are genuine Christians or not. In verses 1–3, there is this amazing statement (just a tiny piece of the massive biblical evidence for why I’m a Calvinist).

When we looked at this together, there fell across my congregation the most amazing silence. We heard the implications of the words *if God permits*. Naturally, they asked, “You mean God might *not* permit a body of believers to go on to maturity?”

God is sovereign. He is sovereign in the church, and he is sovereign among the nations. One testimony to this is in that memorable article in *Christianity Today* years ago retelling the story of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian, and Ed McCully. Steve Saint, Nate’s son, tells the story of his dad getting speared by Waodanis in Ecuador. He tells it after having learned new details of intrigue in the Waodani tribe that were responsible for this killing. These new details implied that the killings were very unlikely. They simply should not have happened; it made no sense. Yet it did happen.

Having discovered the intrigue, he wrote this article. There was one sentence that absolutely blew me out of my living room chair. He wrote, “As [the natives] described their recollections, it occurred to me how incredibly unlikely it was that the palm beach killing took place at all. It is an anomaly that I cannot explain outside of divine intervention.”¹

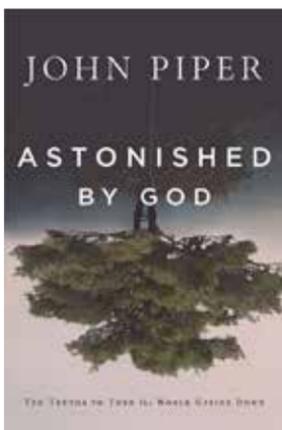
Don't miss that. He says, “I can explain the sparing of my dad only by virtue of divine intervention.” Do you hear what this son is saying? “God killed my dad.” He believes that, and I believe that. In Revelation 6:10, martyrs who shed their blood for the gospel are saying, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood?” The answer comes back, “Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been” (Revelation 6:11). God says, “Rest until the number that I have appointed is complete.” He has in mind a certain number of martyrs. When it is complete, then the end will come.

God is sovereign over the best and worst that happens in world missions. Therefore, the mission cannot fail.

The Price Is Suffering

The price of God's global mission is suffering, and the volatility in the world today against the church is not decreasing. It is increasing, especially among the groups that need the gospel most. There is no such thing as a

1. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/september16/missionaries-did-they-have-to-die.html>



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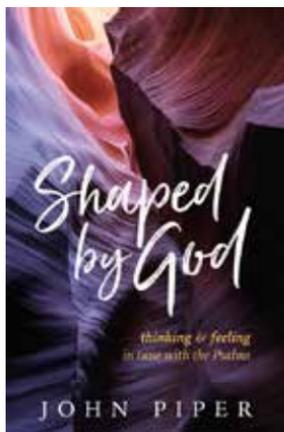
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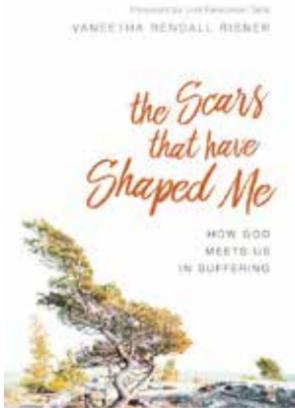
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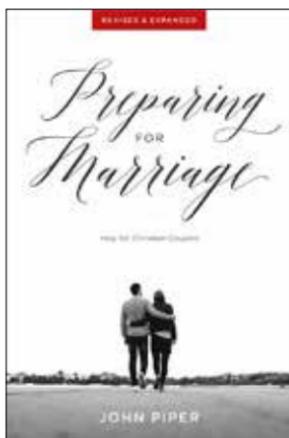
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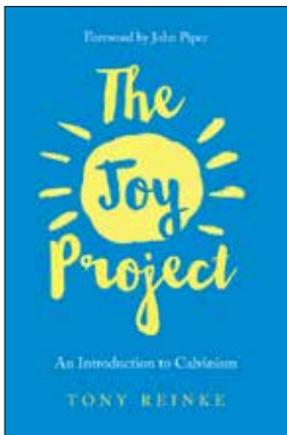
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"A unique and delightful summary of the unfolding drama of God's sovereign grace. Tony, as usual, is biblical, Christ-honoring, gospel-centric, imaginative, and articulate. Who could ask for more? You will enjoy this book!"

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