

LIVING TO PLEASE GOD, PT. 2
HEBREWS 11:4-7

A generation ago, Charles Schultz helped us identify the nature of happiness:

- Happiness is a thumb and a blanket (Linus)
- Happiness is an umbrella and a new raincoat (Lucy)
- Happiness is having a friend (Charlie Brown and Snoopy)
- Happiness is sharing (Linus and Snoopy)
- Happiness is finally getting your big teeth (Linus)
- Happiness is a pile of leaves (Charlie Brown)
- And of course, **happiness is a warm puppy.**



Centuries ago, the American constitution made happiness and its pursuit a fundamental right: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

About a century before that, **Blaise Pascal** wrote, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

Those who drink too much alcohol and those who are teetotalers are both pursuing happiness. Those who spend indiscriminately on Amazon and those who are spendthrifts are both pursuing happiness.

The question is not whether we are pursuing happiness. The question is *where* we will pursue happiness. What will we pursue in a quest to make ourselves happy? The Hebrew readers thought they could make life better by changing their circumstances and avoiding persecution, so they were contemplating giving up faith in Christ. So the writer to the Hebrews is exhorting those readers to find their joy in Christ by remaining faithful to Him. In the opening section of the chapter, he teaches us this:

THE WAY TO LIVE BY FAITH IS TO LIVE FOR GOD’S PLEASURE.

To live for His pleasure means we want what He wants — and specifically, we want what He wants for our lives; we lay aside our personal and fleshly desires and submit to His direction for us. And we want what He wants for us because we believe that He always wants what is best for us.

In these verses, the writer offers **two examples of pleasing God and three principles for pleasing God.**

1. Abel: Pleasing God in Obedient **WORSHIP** (v. 4)
2. Enoch: Pleasing God When Opposed in the **WORLD** (v. 5)
3. Principles for Pleasing God (v. 6)
 - ✓ What does it mean to please God?
 - ✓ If God can be pleased, can He also be **DISPLEASED**?
 - ✓ You Must Come to **HIM**
 - ✓ You Must Believe He is **GOD**
 - ✓ You Must Believe He is **GRACIOUS**

1. Abel: Pleasing God in Obedient WORSHIP (v. 4)

- In faith, Abel worshipped God by bringing a sacrifice that was better than Cain's sacrifice.
 - ✓ Abel's sacrifice was better *because* it was offered in faith.
 - ✓ It was offered in faith because it gave the best (the ***fat portions*** — the best part of the animal).
 - ✓ It was offered in faith because it was of the ***firstlings*** (**Gen. 4:4**) — he made the sacrifice before he knew all that he might have; he gave in a way that demonstrated that he trusted God would provide for him in the future, which is the very point the author of Hebrews is making — living by faith is living (acting) as if God will provide His promises (**10:36**).
- What is significant in Hebrews 11 is the result of Abel's sacrifice —
 - ✓ ***He obtained the testimony...God testifying...*** Twice the writer says that God offered "courtroom" testimony that Abel was righteous and had acted in faithful obedience in worship because of that righteousness. Twice God speaks about Abel and twice God says His gifts were offered in faith and that Abel was righteous.
 - *Cain spoke against Abel* (**Gen. 4:8** — it's not hard to imagine Abel calling Cain to repent) and Cain killed Abel.
 - *God spoke on behalf of Abel* and declared him righteous (the way all men have always been saved) — and it seems that the writer is using this in parallel with "pleasing God" (v. 6).
 - ✓ ***Though he is dead, he still speaks.*** This is not Abel's blood crying for justice (Gen. 4:10). The point of the writer in Hebrews is that these OT saints are offering testimony to us of what faithful living looks like. He is no longer alive, but his testimony is still speaking — "this is living by faith."
 - ✓ "[Abel] is dead, but his faith is a living voice." [Morris] And, "Even a violent death could not muzzle the message of faith." [Anders]
 - ✓ ASIDE: note that Jesus also pointed to Abel's faith, calling him ***righteous Abel*** (Mt. 23:35).
- When we worship and serve the Lord, it is tempting to do so looking for the approval of men (Gal. 1:10). ["What did ___ think of my singing, praying, reading, preaching, gifts...?"] Abel is an example of living by faith in and through worship. ["What does *the Lord* think of my worship?"] He worshipped the Lord to please the Lord, no matter what others thought and no matter what it cost him.

2. Enoch: Pleasing God When Opposed in the WORLD (v. 5)

- One of the most remarkable stories in the Bible is the story of Enoch, but the story of Enoch is also really the story of God: God observed him, God evaluated him, and God took him to Glory.

- Why did God take him to Heaven this way? Because **he obtained the witness...pleasing to God**.
 - ✓ As with Abel (v. 4) and all faithful men (11:2; 10:38 / Hab. 2:4), Enoch was approved by God.
 - ✓ Hebrews says he was “pleasing to God,” but Genesis says that he **walked with God** (5:22, 24). That means that the writer of Hebrews saw those ideas as parallel — Enoch pleased God because he lived his life in constant fellowship with God. And God took such great satisfaction in Enoch’s fellowship with Him that he took him to Heaven without death. We see that in two ways in Genesis:
 - Enoch didn’t just live, carrying out his daily responsibilities; he lived *for God* (5:22, 24). Everyone else in the genealogy of Genesis 5 is said to live; only Enoch is said to live for God. And that is a reminder that life isn’t about work, marriage, children, family, ministry, finances, entertainment, pleasure, rest, or anything else. Life is about the Lord and living for Him.
 - Enoch didn’t die. Death didn’t take him; *God took Him*.
- I want you to also notice the context in which Enoch lived this way —
 - ✓ Enoch was in the seventh generation after Adam — and Adam’s one sin had multiplied many times and grown exponentially by the time Enoch was alive. There was murder (4:8, 23), polygamy (4:19), vengeance (4:14, 24), and one generation after Adam they did not call on the Lord (4:26b).
 - ✓ Enoch was the great grandfather of Noah (Gen. 5:25, 28-29) — a time of great wickedness (6:5-8) that would culminate in the greatest loss of human life in one event in the history of the world.
 - ✓ While Moses isn’t explicit, it seems pretty apparent that one reason Moses singles out Enoch and why God took Enoch to Heaven the way He did was because Enoch was so different from the world.
 - ✓ “Although he lived in a corrupt age that was headed for judgment by flood, Enoch did not conform to the standards of the age in which he lived, but walked in accordance with the standards of God’s righteousness.” [Pentecost, *Faith That Endures*.]
 - ✓ This is a reminder that things do not need to be right in the world for me to live rightly before God. I don’t need to have a sanctified world to live a sanctified life. It is *always* possible to live in a corrupt world and be pleasing to God (which should always be every man’s goal).
 - ✓ And take encouragement in this as well: Enoch *learned* to please God (5:22 — **then**). He was born a sinner, under the curse of Adam, and apparently his life took a dramatic turn at age 65 (a “teenager” compared to our lifespans). He learned fellowship with God — and he is given as an example to the Hebrew readers of the kind of life that they (and we) can have. We can all learn to be pleasing to God — especially as those who have the Spirit of God indwelling and guiding us (Eph. 5:18).
 - ✓ Faithful living is the kind of living that doesn’t say, “the world is against me; I can’t...” Faithful living says, “I have the power of God and the Spirit and Word of God in this wicked world...I can delight in God and pursue fellowship with Him and delight in Him” (Rom. 12:1-2).
 - ✓ [Aside: while only two men have experienced the grace of ascension to Heaven without death, the end for all God’s people is to be taken into His presence: 2 Cor. 5:6-10; and a generation of believers will be taken as dramatically as Enoch and Elijah were: 1 Th. 4:16-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-52.]

3. Principles for Pleasing God (v. 6)

- This verse serves as a summary of the faith of Abel and Enoch and also for the other illustrations to come in the remainder of the chapter; it is an explanation of the essential nature of having faith.
- **What does it mean to please God?**
 - ✓ The word **please** is only used 3x in the NT — Heb. 11:5-6; 13:16.
 - ✓ The adjective is used in several key passages — Rom. 12:1-2; 14:18; 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 4:18; Col. 3:20; Heb. 13:21.
 - ✓ The basic meaning is to do something that gives pleasure or delight to another — the things that are done are satisfying and acceptable to the other person.
 - ✓ What is interesting is that this word is used almost entirely in the NT with the Lord as the object of our pursuit of pleasure — it is the quest of the believer to do things pleasing and acceptable to God.
 - ✓ We have been created for His pleasure (and when we please Him, we will also know pleasure).
 - ✓ What are the things that give God pleasure?
 - Living for Him (Rom. 12:1-2)
 - Sharing with others (Phil. 4:18)
 - Children obeying parents (Col. 3:20)
 - Doing His revealed will (Heb. 13:21).
 - ✓ To please God means that God derives satisfaction through what we do. Since that is true...
- **If God can be pleased, can He also be DISPLEASED?** *Can God be more pleased with us today than yesterday?*
 - ✓ We tend to say (and I've said it many times), "No. His love for us is full and complete. He sees us in the robes of Christ's righteousness and that cannot be increased or decreased." That's true — but we should note that everything I've just said refers to our justification. We can do nothing to increase our justified position in Christ and make God more satisfied with us or Christ.
 - ✓ But in our sanctification, God's pleasure in us *can* be diminished:
 - God is sometimes said to be displeased with believers (2 Sam. 11:27; Prov. 24:17-18).
 - His Spirit is grieved by our sin (Eph. 4:30).
 - Our sin can lead to His discipline of us (Heb. 12:4-6 — He loves us, but reproves us).
 - Our sin can lead to loss of heavenly reward (1 Cor. 3:15).
 - There is danger in not pleasing God by shrinking back from Him (Heb. 10:38).
 - ✓ But also in our sanctification, God's delight in us can be full and preserved as we become what He has designed us to be in salvation — and is our responsibility to pursue:
 - Pleasing God is something that can be learned (Eph. 5:10).
 - Pleasing God is a conscious decision to do things that are acceptable to Him (2 Cor. 5:9, 15).
 - Pleasing God is living out His revealed will for us (Rom. 12:2; cf. also v. 1).
 - Pleasing God should be a growing reality in the believer's life — excelling still more (1 Th. 4:1).

- ✓ Our goal in life is to do the kinds of things that honor (glorify) Him and give Him pleasure and are acceptable to Him; then our salvation will meet its intended goal (transforming obedience).
- ✓ We should be constantly asking, “Is this (act/motive...) acceptable to God? Does it please Him? Is this something for which He died to free me to do/think/desire?”

- **You must come to HIM (by faith)**

- ✓ The temptation of the readers was to move away from God and Christ (**10:35-36**).
- ✓ The writer’s repeated admonition was to go towards Christ (**4:16**; **7:25**; **10:1, 22**; 12:18, 22).
- ✓ And the emphasis in the letter is that they must come in a particular way — with faith: ***without faith...must believe....*** There is no genuine going to God if we don’t believe Him; we *must* (it’s essential) believe (perpetual, ongoing faith) Him. We must live dependently on Him.
- ✓ “He does not say simply that without faith it is difficult to please God; he says that without faith it is impossible to please him! There is no substitute for faith.” [Morris, 115.]
 - To have a faith that pleases God means coming to Him in emptiness for salvation (Mt. 5:3) saying, “I cannot save myself; You must save me, and I trust that You will” (Rom. 3:28).
 - To have a faith that pleases God also means coming to Him regularly with the difficulties and joys of life, believing that He is good and will do good to those who love (and seek) Him.
 - Without faith, Abel, Enoch, Noah (v. 7) and no one else in this chapter or anywhere in Scripture would be able to be pleasing to God. (In fact the verb ***believe*** is emphatic in the sentence.)
- ✓ When the writer says, ***without faith it is impossible to please Him*** he is assuming that the believer will *want* to please God. He cannot conceive of a believer not wanting to please God. The writer assumes the goodness and normalcy of coming to God. He cannot conceive of anyone not wanting to come to God for help. It is the most reasonable (and best) thing to do.
- ✓ This is another way of saying, “you must desire Him and delight in Him and want Him if you want Him to find pleasure in you.” (And He knows what is in our hearts as well.)
- ✓ What do we need to believe about Him?

- **You Must Believe He is GOD**

- ✓ When the writer says that one must believe ***that He is***, it cannot mean anything less than one must believe in the existence of God. If you want to please Him, you must believe in His existence.
- ✓ But it also suggests more than that. Notice that there is no object of the verb ***is*** — “is...*what?*” That suggests that the writer intends us to understand that one must believe that God is all that He has revealed Himself to be in the Scriptures and that He is infinite God and all-sufficient.
- ✓ It may also be an allusion to the statement of God and Christ, “I am.” To believe in God is to believe that He is the great I Am and fully sovereign and worthy of worship. Consider who He is —
 - God is the One who promises to preserve His people — and He will (**10:37**).
 - God is the eternal Creator who made everything out of nothing (**11:2**).

- God is the sovereign judge who gives testimony about who is righteous (11:4).
- God is the One who is not subject to death and sin's curse but is sovereign over it — and He preserves His people in this perverse world (11:5).
- God is the One who is the rewarder (11:6).
- God is the One who warns men of sin and judges men for sin (and saves from sin, 11:7).
- And what else will we see of the nature of the God who is infinitely transcendent in Heb. 11?
- Remember that Hebrews 11 is not about great people, but our great God. It presents God in His glory to demonstrate the reasonableness of believing in Him in our daily affairs.
- When we believe that He is, we believe that nothing overwhelms Him and He exists above and beyond all things and is eternally and infinitely transcendent (capable of fulfilling all promises).

“Belief...involves, first and foremost, belief in Him who is ‘King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God’ (I Tim. 1:17); and belief in God carries with it necessarily belief in His word. It is not belief in the existence of *a* God that is meant, but belief in the existence of *the* God who once declared His will to the fathers through the prophets and in these last days has spoken in His Son. Those who approach Him can do so in full confidence that He exists, that His word is true, and that He will never put off or disappoint the soul that sincerely seeks Him.” [F. F. Bruce]

✓ Why is believing **God is** important? Because we are prone to forget — “Belief in his existence means commitment to his presence and involvement in every part of our lives. In a thoroughly secular society, and because of our preoccupation with material things, it is easy for us to ignore God’s existence...” [Brown] To be faithful (and pleasing) to God, believe that He is all (Col. 3:11).

- **You Must Believe He is GRACIOUS**

- ✓ Not only do we believe that He is God — transcendent and great — but that He is good and kind.
- ✓ ***He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*** —
 - He doesn’t reward everyone — you have to **seek Him**: pursue Him. He doesn’t reward those who are apathetic about and don’t pursue Him. (He will be found by those who seek, Mt. 7:7).
 - He is a **rewarder** — He is a “paymaster for faithfulness.” He pays wages to the faithful. (Though remember that rewards are exactly what they imply — grace gifts that aren’t earned; they are not “payments for service,” but “blessings from kindness.”)
 - This is also an implicit encouragement that it’s okay to be motivated by reward from God. We want to be pleasing to Him because we have considered the future and the coming blessing and we have affirmed that serving Him is worthwhile.
 - “We are afraid that Heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that the mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. There are rewards that do not sully motives. A man’s love for a woman is not mercenary because he wants

to marry her, nor his love for poetry mercenary because he wants to read it, nor his love of exercise less disinterested because he wants to run and leap and walk. Love, by definition, seeks to enjoy its object.” [C. S. Lewis]

- Heaven and our rewards are not a bribe; they are a grace gift that should be a deep longing.
- The writer has already affirmed that God rewards (10:35), as does the rest of Scripture also:

... God verbally commends those who are faithful (Mt. 25:21ff)

... God honors those who are faithful (Jn. 12:26).

... God gives rewards on earth now (1 Tim. 6:17).

... God will reward finally and fully in Heaven (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

... God’s reward is eternity in Heaven (2 Tim. 4:8).

... God also rewards with gifts of grace in Heaven (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 4:10).

... God is generous with His rewards (Mt. 19:27-30; 20:1ff, 15-16).

- ✓ To say that He is a rewarder is to recognize that He is gracious in His care of His people. He is sympathetic towards us and understands our troubles (4:14-16). Whatever trouble we have now, He will ultimately resolve and give us infinite and eternal grace.

- You may not have ever considered the importance of believing in God — following His commands and living to please Him and be rewarded by Him. If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, I urge you to believe in Him and His death to take away your sin debt and liberate you to fellowship with Him (Heb. 2:9-11).
- How does this verse relate to the topic of living by faith? If we want to live in faith in God, we believe:
 - ✓ He is God and able to do all that is necessary in every situation (10:37).
 - ✓ He will always do good to His people. He will not leave them unrewarded (10:35).
 - ✓ There is value in orienting our lives toward Him, believing that what He promised, He will do. He cared for Abel and He cared for Enoch — faithful men who were righteous and pleasing to God. And He is just as trustworthy for us who believe and follow Him today, even when we can’t see what He is doing in the particular moments of our lives.

CONCLUSION: We tend to minimize the significance of pleasing the Lord and pursuing His rewards:

“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. **We are far too easily pleased.**” [C. S. Lewis]

BENEDICTION: Hebrews 13:20-21