

"THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN ALL HE DOES"

*February 1, 1987
Bethlehem Baptist Church
Morning
John Piper, Pastor
Copyright ©1987, 1996 John Piper*

*Psalm 135:6 "Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all deeps."*

Two assumptions lie at the foundation of this new series of messages on the pleasures of God.

1. The first assumption is that "The worth and excellency of a soul is measured by the object of its love." (Henry Scougal). If we apply that to God, then one way of beholding the worth and excellency of God is to meditate on what he loves.

Another way to put it would be to say that the measure of God's dignity is determined by what he delights in. Or another way would be to say that the greatness of God's excellence is registered by his enjoyments. What he takes pleasure in signals the beauty and the preciousness of his character.

2. The second assumption is that when we fix our mind's attention on the worth and excellency of God, that is, when we meditate on his glory, we are changed little by little into his likeness.

And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. (2 Cor. 3:18)

So my goal in these next 12 weeks is to direct your attention to the pleasures of God revealed in Scripture; in the hope that you will see in them some of the infinite measure of God's worth and excellency; and in seeing this glory that you might rise one step at a time into his likeness; so that at home and work and school people will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Portray his pleasures in preaching. Behold his glory in listening. Approach his likeness in meditation. Display his worth in the world. May God be gracious to bless the ministry of his word in these weeks.

Last week we focused on the pleasure that God the Father has in his Son. The most important lesson to be learned from that truth is this: God is and always has been an exuberantly happy God. He has never been lonely. He has always rejoice with overflowing satisfaction in the glory of his Son. You might say that the Son of God has

always been the landscape of God's excellencies or the panorama of God's perfections. And therefore from all eternity God has beheld with overflowing satisfaction the magnificent terrain of his own radiance reflected in the Son.

A second lesson to learn from this truth is that God is not constrained by anything outside himself to do anything he does not want to do. If God were unhappy, if he were in some way deficient, then he might indeed be constrained from outside in some way to do what he does not want to do in order to make up his deficiency and finally to be happy.

That is the way we are. We come into the world knowing almost nothing and have to spend years and years going to classes or learning in the school of hard knocks. Parents and teachers tell us to do things that we don't like to do because we need to do them to overcome some deficiency in ourselves -- to increase our knowledge or strengthen our bodies or refine our manners.

But God is not like that. He has been complete and overflowing with satisfaction from all eternity. He needs no education. No one can offer anything to him that doesn't already come from him. And so no one can bribe him or coerce him in any way. You can't bribe a mountain spring with bucketfuls of water from the valley. Therefore God does what he does not begrudgingly or under external constraint as though he were boxed in or trapped by some unforeseen or unplanned situation.

On the contrary, because he is complete and exuberantly happy and overflowing with satisfaction in the fellowship of the Trinity, all he does is free and uncoerced. His deeds are the overflow of his joy. This is what it means when the Scripture says that God does something according to the "good pleasure" of his will. It means that nothing outside God's own pleasure -- the pleasure he has in what he is, nothing but that pleasure -- has constrained his choices and his deeds.

This brings us to the focus of today's message -- "The Pleasure of God in All that He Does" -- and today's text: Psalm 135.

The Psalm begins by calling us to praise the Lord: "Praise the Lord. Praise the name of the Lord." Then, starting in verse 3 the psalmist gives us reasons for why we should feel praise rising in our hearts toward God. It says, for example, "Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good." The list of reasons for praise goes on until it comes to verse 6, and this is the verse I want us to focus on this morning:

Whatever the Lord pleases he does,
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all deeps.

Psalm 115:3 says the same thing:

Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.

This verse teaches that whenever God acts he acts in a way that pleases him. God is never constrained to do a thing that he despises. He is never backed into a corner where his only recourse is to do something he hates to do. He does whatever he pleases. And therefore, in some sense, he has pleasure in all that he does.

Isaiah uses the same Hebrew word (as a noun) in Isaiah 46:10 where the Lord says,

My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my pleasure.

On the basis of these texts and many others we should bow before God and praise his sovereign freedom -- that in some sense at least he always acts in freedom, according to his own "good pleasure," following the dictates of his own delights. He never becomes the victim of circumstance. He is never forced into a situation where he must do something in which he cannot rejoice.

This is a glorious picture of God in his sovereign freedom -- to do whatever he pleases and to accomplish all his pleasure. But it would be a fuzzy picture, a bit out of focus, if we stopped here. To bring it into focus and sharpen it up we have to ask this question: "How can God say in Ezekiel 18:23 and 32 that he does not have pleasure in the death of any impenitent person, if in fact he accomplishes all his pleasure and does whatever he pleases?"

In Ezekiel 18:30 God is warning the house of Israel of impending judgment: "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord." And he is urging them to repent: "Repent and turn from all your transgressions." At the end of verse 31 he says, "Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord God; so turn, and live."

This seems to be a very different picture than the one we saw in Psalm 135, where God does whatever he pleases. Here he seems to be cornered. It seems that he is forced into judging them when he really doesn't want to. He seems to be about to do something that he is not pleased to do. Is he going to accomplish all his pleasure or not? Is God really free to do all everything according to his good pleasure? Or does his sovereign freedom have its limits? Can he do whatever he pleases up to a point, and then after that is he cornered into doing things he only grieves to do?

We might try to solve the problem by going back to Psalm 135 and saying that God does whatever he pleases in the natural world but not in the personal sphere. After all it says in verse 7:

He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

But this effort to limit God's freedom to the sphere of nature will not work for two reasons.

1) One is that if God controls the wind and makes it blow whenever and wherever he pleases -- which is certainly true (remember Jesus' "Peace! Be still!") -- then God is responsible for the destruction of thousands of lives by drowning because of the storms and hurricanes and tornadoes and monsoons and typhoons which God has brought forth from his storehouses over the centuries.

So when Psalm 135 says that the Lord does whatever he pleases it has to include the taking of personal life at sea through the wind which he alone controls.

2) But the text doesn't leave us to draw out silent inferences like that. The Psalmist goes on in verses 8-11 to say that God's sovereign freedom was shown most vividly in the Exodus out of Egypt:

8) He it was who smote the first-born of Egypt, both of man and of beast. . . 10) who smote many nations and slew mighty kings. . .

That is the second reason you can't limit the freedom of God in this Psalm to the natural realm. When the Psalmist says in verse 6 that "whatever the Lord pleases he does," he doesn't just refer implicitly to the tragedies owing to wind; he also refers explicitly to the destruction of rebellious Egyptians, and nations and kings. This is the scope of what God does when he does whatever he pleases.

So in Ezekiel it says that God is not pleased with the death of unrepentant people, and in Psalm 135 it says that God does whatever he pleases including the slaying unrepentant people. And the very same Hebrew verb is used in Psalm 135:6 ("he pleases") and Ezekiel 18:32 ("he has pleasure").

Before I suggest a solution to this problem let me make it worse.

Many Christians today have a conception of God that isn't troubled by his being cornered into doing things he doesn't want to do. And I can easily imagine that one response to what we have seen so far would be to say that we have created an artificial problem because Psalm 135 doesn't actually say that God takes delight in destroying the Egyptians.

Perhaps someone would say that "doing whatever he pleases" in Psalm 135:6 is just a figure of speech and doesn't carry the sense of pleasure or delight. And so they would say that God only grieves when he must judge unrepentant sinners, and there is no sense in which he is doing what he is pleased to do.

In answer to this I would say again that the same word used in Psalm 135:6 for God's being "pleased" is used in Ezekiel 18:32 for God's not being "pleased". Then I would direct attention to Deuteronomy 28:63 where Moses warns of coming judgment on

unrepentant Israel. But this time it says something strikingly different from Ezekiel 18:32,

And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. (Cf. Prov. 1:24-26; Rev. 18:20; Ezek. 5:13)

So we are brought back to the inescapable fact that in some sense God does not delight in the death of the wicked (that is the message of Ezekiel 18), and in some sense he does (that is the message of Psalm 135:6-11 and Deuteronomy 28:63).

I have commended a solution to you before and I will commend it again: namely, that the death and misery of the unrepentant is in and of itself no delight to God. God is not a sadist. He is not malicious or bloodthirsty. Instead when a rebellious, wicked, unbelieving person is judged, what God delights in is the vindication of truth and goodness and of his own honor and glory.

When Moses warns Israel that the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon them and destroying them if they don't repent, he means that those who have rebelled against the Lord and moved beyond repentance will not be able to gloat that they have made the Almighty miserable. Quite the contrary. Moses says that when they are judged they will unwittingly give an opportunity for God to rejoice in the demonstration of his justice and his power and the infinite worth of his glory.

Let this be a warning to us this morning. God is not mocked. He is not trapped or cornered or coerced. Even on the way to Calvary he had legions at his disposal. "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord" -- of my own good pleasure, for the joy that is set before me. At the one point in the history of the universe where God looked trapped he was totally in charge doing precisely what he pleased -- dying to justify the ungodly like you and me.

So let us stand in awe and wonder this morning: "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever he pleases." Amen.

© Bethlehem Baptist Church. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies. (5) you include DGM's toll-free number (888/346-4700) and web site address (www.desiringGOD.org) on the copied resource. For placing this material on the web, a link to the document on DGM's web site is preferred. If your intended use is other than that outlined above, please contact Desiring God Ministries, 720 13th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55415. (612) 338-7653, mail@desiringGOD.org.