

*When the*  
**DARKNESS**  
*Will Not Lift*

BOOKS BY JOHN PIPER

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*When the*  
**DARKNESS**  
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*Doing What We Can*  
*While We Wait for God—and Joy*

**JOHN PIPER**

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# WHEN THE DARKNESS WILL NOT LIFT

*Doing What We Can  
While We Wait for God—and Joy*

*I waited patiently for the LORD.*

PSALM 40:1

*Weeping may tarry for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.*

PSALM 30:5

*Ab my deare angrie Lord,  
Since thou dost love, yet strike;  
Cast down, yet help afford;  
Sure I will do the like.*

*I will complain, yet praise;  
I will bewail, approve:  
And all my sowre-sweet dayes  
I will lament, and love.*

GEORGE HERBERT

*“Bitter-sweet”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert, “Bitter-sweet,” from his collection titled *The Temple* (1633), quoted from: <http://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Bittersweet.html> (accessed July 11, 2006).

## INTRODUCTION

# FAITH ALONE AND THE FIGHT FOR JOY



**I**n addressing the topic of spiritual darkness, I am aware that I have put my oar in a very large sea. I rise from my desk and walk past a wall of books that speak more wisely than I on the care and cure of sad Christian souls. Just opening these volumes reminds me of how many wise and valuable things could be said—and cannot be said in a book of this size. It will always be so. The Word of God is inexhaustible, and the world he made holds countless treasures waiting to be found by clear eyes in search of Christ-exalting joy.

The needs of embattled people who fight for joy will always be as diverse as the people themselves. So I content myself with rowing out into this sea as far as my limits allow, and I pray that you will search out some of these great old books and go farther in your quest for joy than I am able to take you here.<sup>1</sup>

### TO HELP THOSE FOR WHOM JOY STAYS OUT OF REACH

My aim is to give some guidance and hope to those for whom joy seems to stay out of reach. Virtually all Bible-saturated physicians of the soul have spoken about long seasons of darkness and desolation. In the old days they called it melancholy. Richard Baxter, for example, who died in 1691, wrote with astonishing relevance about the complexities of dealing with Christians who seem

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Teellinck, *The Path of True Godliness*, trans. Annemie Godbehere, ed. Joel R. Beeke (repr. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2003); Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (1630; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998); William Bridge, *A Lifting Up for the Downcast* (1649; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979); Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (1648; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979); John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006); John Owen, *Communion with God* (1657; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992); Richard Baxter (died 1691), “The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow by Faith and Physic,” in *Puritan Sermons 1659–1689*, vol. 3, ed. Samuel Annesley (Wheaton, Ill.: Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 1981 [available to read at <http://www.puritansermons.com/baxter/baxter25.html>]); Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (1692; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999); Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1739; repr. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1996); Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (1746; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986); Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Gaius Davies, *Genius, Grief and Grace: A Doctor Looks at Suffering and Success* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001); J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: The Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002).

unable to enjoy God. “Delighting in God, and in his word and ways,” he said, “is the flower and life of true religion. But these that I speak of can delight in nothing—neither God, nor in his word, nor any duty.”<sup>2</sup>

I think that is technically an overstatement. At least I prefer to say that all true believers in Christ have within them the seed of joy, and that they do experience it in some real way. They may not have the “flower” of “true religion,” but they do have the “life,” even though it may be only a mustard seed of joy in Christ.<sup>3</sup> They have tasted and seen that the Lord Jesus is a sweet, life-giving spring of eternal joy for their souls (Ps. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:2-3), but the taste, even though it indicates that there is true spiritual life, is easily overwhelmed by the floods of darkness that threaten to bury it. These are the ones I want to help in this small book.

## THE FOUNDATION OF GUTSY GUILT

This book began as the final chapter of a larger book titled *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Baxter, “The Cure of Melancholy,” 257.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship between joy and saving faith see John Piper, “The Purifying Power of Living by Faith” in *Future Grace* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), chapters 14–16.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 209-34.

I hope that if this small book proves helpful, readers will consider what is in the larger one. There are crucial foundations in that larger book which are not included here. One of the most important is learning to fight for joy like a justified sinner. I call this “gutsy guilt.” Every embattled saint has learned this secret, even if they never called it by that name.

Gutsy guilt means learning to live on the rock-solid truth of what happened for us when Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again from the dead. It means realizing that in this life we will always be sinful and imperfect. Therefore *in ourselves* we will always be guilty. This will prove emotionally devastating if we do not discover the reality of justification by faith, that is, the secret of gutsy guilt. This is not the only weapon with which we fight for joy in the darkness of discouragement, but it is one of the most foundational and the most important.

The biblical truth of justification says that my rescue from sin and God’s wrath is first a legal rescue, and only then a moral one. First, I am legally absolved of guilt and credited with a righteousness that I don’t have. That is, I am declared righteous in the courtroom of heaven, where God sits as judge, and where I, with-

out justification, would stand condemned by his law. That’s what the word “justify” means: not *make* just, but *declare* just.<sup>5</sup>

We can see this in Luke 7:29 where the people “justified *God*”! That is, they declared that he was just. They didn’t *make* him just. The difference is that we are sinners and do not have a righteousness of our own. We should, but we don’t. That’s why we are guilty and destined for eternal punishment. This is the deepest root of all our misery. If we could sever this root, we would fight for joy as victors. God’s gift of justification on the basis of Christ’s blood and righteousness does sever this root of misery.

## THE GREAT WORK OF CHRIST OUTSIDE OF US

To make a way for us to be saved, God sent Christ to live a perfect divine-human life, and die an obedient death. In this way Christ became both the substitute punishment for our sins (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 3:18) and the substitute performer of our righteousness (Rom. 5:19; 10:4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Therefore, in the courtroom

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<sup>5</sup>For a fuller explanation and defense of this understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith, see John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002).

of God, my guilt for sin is removed by Christ's blood ("In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" [Eph. 1:7]); and my title to heaven is provided by Christ's obedience ("By the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" [Rom. 5:19]). I am declared just—freed from the punishment of sin and now possessing a title to heaven. This is what the Bible means by justification.

The capstone of its joy-producing glory is that justification is *by faith alone* apart from works of the law. Paul said, "We hold that one is justified *by faith* apart from works of the law. . . . To the one who does not work but *trusts him who justifies the ungodly*, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 3:28; 4:4-5). The best news in all the world to the "ungodly," who grieve under the cloud of darkness and guilt, is the news that God, by faith alone, counts them as righteous because of Christ. This is the rock where we stand when the dark clouds gather and the floods lick at our feet: justification is by *grace alone* (not mixed with our merit), through *faith alone* (not mixed with our works) on the basis of *Christ alone* (not mingling his righteousness with ours), to the glory of *God alone* (not ours).

## CONFUSING JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION WILL KILL JOY

Then, and only then, on the basis of this forgiveness and this declaration of righteousness, God gives us his Holy Spirit and progressively transforms us morally into the image of his Son. This progressive change is *not* justification, but is based on justification. This change is what we call *sanctification*. “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom. 6:22).

First, the legal issue is settled. In the courtroom of heaven, we ungodly sinners are declared righteous by faith alone. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. We do not have a righteousness of our own when God accepts us. Our faith was not our righteousness. It was our desperate receiving of Christ and all that he is for us. We had not yet become loving. Instead, with empty hands we received Christ whose faithful life of love perfectly fulfilled the law of God. By faith alone we were united to Christ. And all that he is was imputed to us, the ungodly. This is justification. This is the settling of the legal issue first.

When that is settled—and it is settled in the twinkling of an eye—then the moral progress goes forward

(sanctification) all too slowly, we lament. Both justification and sanctification are gifts from God. Both are bought by the blood of Christ. They are inseparable, but different. Both are by faith alone. Justification is by faith alone because only faith receives the declaration that we, the ungodly, are counted righteous. Sanctification is by faith alone because only faith receives the power to bear the fruit of love.

It is crucial in the fight for joy that we not confuse or combine justification and sanctification. Confusing them will, in the end, undermine the gospel, and turn justification by *faith* into justification by *performance*. If that happens, the great gospel weapon in the fight for joy will fall from our hands.

God accepts us on the basis of Christ's righteousness, not ours. To be sure, our progressive sanctification—our all-too-slow growth in Christlikeness—matters. It is the necessary evidence that the seed of spiritual life is in our soul and that our faith is real.<sup>6</sup> But,

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<sup>6</sup> The historic *Westminster Confession of Faith* expresses well how faith alone justifies but is never alone, and always gives rise to love. "Those whom God effectually calleth He also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone: nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness, by faith: which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God" (11.1); and "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love" (11:2).

O what a difference it makes to be assured, in the discouraging darkness of our own imperfection, that we have a perfect righteousness *outside ourselves*, namely Christ's.

### JOHN BUNYAN SEES HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HEAVEN

This was John Bunyan's experience and he tells his story to encourage us to rejoice in the doctrine of justification—that there is a perfect, objective, external righteousness imputed to us that is not our own but Christ's. Bunyan is the one who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which has sold more copies in English than any book besides the Bible. He was a pastor in the seventeenth century who spent over twelve years in prison because he refused to stop preaching the word of the cross. The greatest Puritan theologian and contemporary of Bunyan, John Owen, when asked by King Charles why he went to hear an uneducated tinker preach, said, "I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts."<sup>7</sup>

But Bunyan was not always so bold and full of

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<sup>7</sup>John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work* (London: The Hulbert Publishing Co., 1928), 366. This is a paraphrase of an indirect quote.

gospel power. In his twenties there were terrible struggles. “A whole flood of blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the Scriptures were poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment. . . . My heart was at times exceeding hard. If I would have given a thousand pounds for a tear, I could not shed one. . . . Oh, the desperateness of man’s heart. . . . I feared that this wicked sin of mine might be that sin unpardonable. . . . Oh, no one knows the terrors of those days but myself.”<sup>8</sup>

Then came the decisive moment of triumph over despair and joylessness. It was an awakening to the magnificent truth of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. *Thy righteousness is in heaven.* And . . . I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness

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<sup>8</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1978), 55-59.

worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, “The same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.”<sup>9</sup>

### START WITH DESPAIR IN YOURSELF

Bunyan went home rejoicing when he saw that his righteousness was outside himself. It was Jesus Christ. I pray that this will be your experience too. Where should you start? Start at the easiest place for those in darkness. Start with despair. Despair of finding any answer in yourself. I pray that you will cease from all efforts to look inside yourself for the rescue you need. I pray that you will do what only desperate people can do, namely, cast yourself on Christ. May you say to him, “You are my only hope. I have no righteousness in myself. I am overwhelmed with sin and guilt. I am under the wrath of God. My own conscience condemns me, and makes me miserable. I am perishing. Darkness is all about me. Have mercy upon me. I trust you.”

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<sup>9</sup> *Grace Abounding*, 90-91.

He has promised not to turn you away. “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). By this act of faith God will unite you to Jesus. You will be “in him,” and in him you will be now and forever loved, forgiven, and righteous. The light will rise in your darkness in due time. God will hold onto you (Jude 24). You will make it. That is his promise: “Those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). The glory is coming. In the meantime, “this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:17-18).