

PLEASURE OR PAIN? FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN LIVING ONLY FOR THIS
WORLD AND LIVING ONLY FOR THE WORLD TO COME.

BY
MATTHEW RUGEN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. DR. AARON JENSEN, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

20 FEBRUARY 2026

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	VI
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
THE DITCH OF LIVING ONLY FOR PLEASURE.....	9
The Example of Solomon.....	9
Hedonism	9
Examples of Hedonism in the Christian Life	10
Crass Hedonism	10
Subtle Hedonism – Attitude Towards Retirement	11
Subtle Hedonism – “Lifestyle Creep”	12
Subtle Hedonism – Personal Relationships.....	13
Why This is Bad.....	14
Problem 1: Idolatry	14
Problem 2: The Absence of Meaning.....	15
Problem 3: Not Authentic Christianity	16
Examining One’s Attitude.....	18
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DILEMMA.....	20
Misunderstanding Bible Passages About Suffering	20
Serious About Getting To Heaven	21
Guilt Over Blessings In Life	22
Perpetual Pessimism.....	23
Overworking/Self-Inflicted Suffering	24
Why This is Bad.....	26
Problem 1: Misunderstanding the Theology of the Cross	26
Problem 2: Distortion/Neglect of Vocation	28

Problem 3a: A Distortion of God’s Character.....	30
Problem 3b: An Ignorance of what God says about Earthly Blessings.....	30
The Devil’s Goal Through It All.....	33
THE MIDDLE GROUND	34
A Solomon-like Realization.....	34
Properly Hating One’s Life.....	34
Focusing on the Goal of Heaven.....	35
Seeing One’s Place Within God’s Metanarrative	37
From Eden to Eden.....	37
True Joy and A Life to the Full.....	38
Carrying the Cross of Suffering	40
The Pleasures of Life	41
Vocation and Evangelism	42
The Middle Ground Is Trusting God with a Childlike Faith.....	43
Children as the Model of Faith.....	43
Fearing God.....	44
What Does This Middle Ground Look Like?.....	45
Not Worrying about the Future	45
Contentment	46
Living in the Moment.....	49
How to Live in the Moment	51
The Example of Job	54
Cautions	56
CONCLUSION.....	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	61
APPENDIX: HYMNS	63

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Christian struggle to navigate between two spiritual extremes: living only for the pleasures of this world and living only for the world to come. It examines the theology of Ecclesiastes and the theology of the cross to see how pleasure becomes idolatry when elevated to life's ultimate goal, and how an overreaction to this danger can produce an unhealthy suspicion of earthly blessings, distorted views on one's vocation in life, and a misunderstanding of God's character. It argues for the importance of Christians finding the narrow middle road between living only for pleasure and living only for pain. Christians want to acknowledge God's gifts with thankfulness and also realize that suffering is a necessary part of being a Christian. The key to finding the narrow middle road is a childlike faith in God, rooted within God's metanarrative, which leaves the big questions of life in God's hands, and which trusts God to allow into the Christian's life what he knows is best.¹

1. This abstract was drafted with assistance from ChatGPT (OpenAI), then revised and edited by the author.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that one night God comes to you in a dream and tells you, “You have two options. This very night I can take you to be with me forever. Or I can give you an amazing life on this earth for the next sixty years and then I will take you to be with me forever after you have enjoyed your time here.” How would you respond? Would you choose to be with God right away and forego all the good things you could have experienced here on earth? Or would the prospect of earthly prosperity and a good life cause you to put off your eternal goal for a while?

Many Christians might choose the second option. “If I’m going to get to heaven either way,” they say, “then why not choose the option that will allow me to experience a good life both in this world and then forever in the world to come?” All Christians have experienced the allure of the things of the world. It feels good to have a loving family, to enjoy nice food or entertainment, and to accomplish goals and see new places. Christians know that the world to come is their home forever, yet on earth, this seems so far off in the future. They have never experienced the perfection of heaven, but they have experienced and know what it is like to enjoy the pleasures of this world. These things might cause a Christian to hypothetically “delay” getting to heaven so that they can live a good life here on earth.

On the other hand, some Christians might choose the first option. “This world is evil and sinful, and the things of this world can only lead me away from God and my ultimate goal of being with him forever,” they say. “I don’t want to take any risks. This world really doesn’t mean much if it is all going to be destroyed in the end. I want to get out of here as quickly as I can.” Every Christian has experienced the pain and hardships of this world. They know that eternity with God is the end goal and ultimately the most important thing, a treasure that family, food, entertainment, accomplishing goals, and travelling cannot match. Therefore, they might choose the first option because they think that this world is meaningless and has nothing to offer them.

Which view is correct? Is there a correct view? While this scenario is hypothetical and somewhat unrealistic, it can help Christians think through how they should view this world and the world to come. How much love should Christians have for the things of this world? Is it fine to want a good life on earth and possess material blessings? Or should Christians be so focused on the world to come that they forego all pleasure in this world? Is pleasure good and pain bad? Or is pain good and pleasure bad? How should Christians view their lives on this earth in relation to their eternal life in the world to come?

In summary, the question that ties all these questions together is this: How should Christians view pain and pleasure as they seek to walk the narrow middle road between living only for this world and living only for the world to come? This is the question that this thesis will attempt to answer by looking at what God's word says and applying it to the lives of Christians. First, it will review past literature that discusses various aspects of pain, pleasure, and the middle ground between this world and the world to come. Then, it will examine the ditch of living only for this world or living only for pleasure. It will describe some common pitfalls Christians can run into and explain the dangers of these. Next it will examine the opposite ditch of living only for the world to come or living only for pain. It will similarly explore some pitfalls and explain their danger. Finally, it will conclude with a scriptural solution to finding the narrow middle ground between both ditches and include some practical advice for Christians to specifically appropriate and apply what the Bible says about this matter to their personal lives.

The Bible has much to say about this topic, yet even after much study and thought, there is still much more to be said. My hope is that this thesis will spark new thoughts, conversations, and further study on this matter, and that Christians can become more conscious of the biblical mindset with which they should live life on their journey from this world to the world to come.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When Christians meditate on pleasure, pain, and how they view living in this present world, knowing that it is not their eternal home, they may soon become aware of two ditches they can fall into. The first ditch is that they live only for the pleasure of this world and lose sight of eternity with God. The second ditch is that they become so focused on heaven that they become suspicious of the pleasures of this world and live only for pain. There are several authors who examine aspects of this question by addressing one or more issues related to this dilemma.

Daniel Deutschlander's *The Narrow Lutheran Middle* specifically explores the middle ground between having an "idolatrous love of the world" and an "ungrateful contempt for the world."² God created the world for humans to enjoy, but because of sin, humans have made the world and its treasures into their ultimate goals. Deutschlander acknowledges that while the ditch of contempt for the world is less likely to be a temptation for Christians, it is a temptation nonetheless.³

The theology of the cross also addresses this dilemma by emphasizing the importance of the suffering found in the Christian cross. For Christians, not all pain is bad because God produces blessings through the suffering of his children. Deutschlander's *The Theology of the Cross* is a masterpiece that explores this doctrine in greater profundity and applies it to the lives of all Christians. Deutschlander, in a deeply theological yet extremely practical way, contrasts the theology of the cross with a theology of glory and helps the Christian see how true joy and glory are only possible through the cross.⁴

2. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

3. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 170.

4. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2008), 10–12.

Deutschlander defines the theology of the cross as “that study of the Word of God that looks for the connection between [Christ’s] cross and ours.”⁵ A correct understanding of this truth is essential when Christians consider how they should view their life on earth and their life in eternity. It also helps guard against misunderstanding the theology of the cross and glorifying the act of suffering in and of itself.

Gerhard Forde’s *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* analyzes Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, where Luther first specifically wrote about a theology of the cross. Like Deutschlander, Forde distinguishes the theology of the cross from the theology of glory. He cautions against doing what many do, that is, seeing the theology of the cross as a “negative theology of glory,”⁶ where suffering or pain becomes something of a good work humans can do. Christians never want to turn the crosses they bear into a way to gain God’s favor. Once again, a correct understanding of the theology of the cross is important for this discussion because it “determine[s] how we think about ourselves.”⁷

Luke Thompson’s *Your Life Has Meaning* is a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes in which Thompson compares the writings of “The Preacher” in Ecclesiastes with the writings of philosophers throughout the centuries. Thompson explains the importance of seeing one’s life within God’s metanarrative.⁸ Doing so can help the Christian find the middle ground between living only for this world and only for the world to come. Thompson also discusses a Christian’s view on pleasure and pain.

Zach Eswine’s *Recovering Eden* is a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes. Eswine sees the passages that talk about enjoying God’s blessings in this world as a common thread running throughout the book.⁹ He examines the connections between Ecclesiastes and Eden and proposes that looking at life

5. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 32.

6. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1997), 83.

7. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 11.

8. Luke G. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning* (Northwestern, 2019), 136.

9. Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, *The Gospel According to the Old Testament* (P & R, 2014), 15.

before the fall into sin can help Christians understand how to view life now. He also asks a question very similar to the one being explored in this thesis: “How is it that we embrace where we are without trying to make it do what only God can do for us? How do we forsake the ‘gain’ the world offers while remaining engaged with the good that God has given in the world?”¹⁰

In season seven of *The Notable Podcast*¹¹ Jon and Tim Bourman walk through the book of Ecclesiastes by exploring its central themes. In episode three, they analyze the *carpe diem*¹² passages and make compelling applications to the life of Christians. While the Bourmans do not specifically explore the question proposed in this thesis, what they advocate in their podcast is very helpful in coming to an understanding of the middle ground between living only for pleasure and living only for pain.

Kevin Gushiken’s *A Theology of Play* explores the concept of play and its role in the life of a Christian. He defines play as “the God-given ability and permission to fully enjoy moments in life as God intended, with freedom and pleasure.”¹³ He observes that often Christians view heaven as the ultimate reality where everything important takes place, while earth is just a stop along the way.¹⁴ In chapter two, Gushiken explores several “barriers to play” which prevent Christians from enjoying God’s blessings on earth. Gushiken argues that playing and consciously enjoying moments in life can benefit Christians spiritually and revolutionize their lives and love for God and one another.¹⁵ To help Christians see this, he offers some practical suggestions for incorporating play and leisure into life. Gushiken views the enjoyment of pleasures on earth in a positive light, yet entirely within the framework of God’s will.

10. Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, 35.

11. Jonathan Bourman and Timothy Bourman, hosts, *The Notable Podcast*, season 7, The Notable Podcast, 2021, <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.

12. The *carpe diem* passages is a common designation for passages in Ecclesiastes that give specific instructions for how to live and make the most of life now.

13. Kevin Gushiken, *A Theology of Play* (Kregel Academic, 2024), 20.

14. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 29.

15. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 32.

Becoming Worldly Saints by Michael Wittmer explicitly explores a solution to the middle road between living only for this world and living only for the world to come. Wittmer describes the dilemma: “You would like to lay up treasure in heaven, but you also want to have some fun down here.”¹⁶ Wittmer warns of the ditch that Christians can fall into when they think that this world is only evil. He reiterates that heaven matters, but so does this world. However, while Wittmer provides some valuable insights, he comes to the wrong conclusion regarding pleasure. He promotes an enjoyment of God’s earthly blessings, but specifically because he believes that a flourishing life makes Christianity attractive.¹⁷

C. S. Lewis, the very influential Christian apologist, wrote three books which play into this discussion: *The Screwtape Letters*,¹⁸ *The Great Divorce*,¹⁹ and *The Weight of Glory*.²⁰ *The Screwtape Letters* is the fictional correspondence of a demon who gives advice to his nephew on how to best tempt humans. His demonic perspective provides insights into temptations humans face when thinking about the present world and the world to come. *The Great Divorce* imagines a man who takes a bus from hell to heaven and observes how many of the people who came with him want to return to hell. This book gives some vivid insights into the fallen human condition and how humans can place things above God in their hearts. *The Weight of Glory* is an essay in which Lewis talks about the Christian’s relation to the present and eternity. Here Lewis provides some valuable quotes on the human existence.

In conclusion, the theology of the cross and the theology of Ecclesiastes are fundamental in finding a middle ground between living only for this world and living only for the world to come. In response to living only for pleasure, the theology of the cross shows that pleasure is not always good and

16. Michael Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?* (Zondervan, 2015), 10.

17. Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?*, 13.

18. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Macmillan, 1959).

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Macmillan, 1946).

20. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Macmillan, 1949).

that suffering is not always evil. In fact, God works through suffering to bring Christians to their eternal home. In response to living only for pain, Ecclesiastes illustrates that because God gives his children's lives infinite meaning and allows them to see their place in his grand story, this world still has meaning, and humans can and should enjoy the blessings God gives them in this world.

While Deutschlander explores the ditch of contempt for the world in *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, he acknowledges that this ditch is not as attractive as the ditch of living only for the world,²¹ and therefore does not write extensively on this ditch. While Deutschlander's solution to this dilemma is very insightful, this is an area where I want to dig deeper and flesh out how the ditch of living only for pain or living only for the world to come could subtly and dangerously manifest itself in the lives of Christians.

Eswine's *Recovering Eden*, Wittmer's *Becoming Worldly Saints*, and Jon and Tim Bourman's *The Notable Podcast* all contain insights into how properly focusing on the earthly blessings God gives can lead Christians to find the middle ground between pleasure and pain. Gushiken's *A Theology of Play* also contributes to the discussion by examining the Christian life from the perspective of play, and his chapter on "barriers to play" can be applicable when thinking about how people can fall into the trap of living only for pain.

Deutschlander's *The Theology of the Cross* and Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* are important for properly defining the theology of the cross. When Christians become wary of the things of this world on their walk to heaven, it is possible that they take suffering and the Christian cross too far and get to a point where they live only for pain. Deutschlander's specific definition of the theology of the cross gets rid of these misunderstandings and prevents Christians from straying into the ditch of glorifying contempt for the world. Furthermore, Forde's warning of how the theology of the cross can be made into a negative theology of glory is good to keep in mind when thinking about ways Christians can stray from the middle road and into the ditch of living only for pain.

21. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 170.

Together, these resources help a Christian acquire a godly perspective for living between the extremes of pain and pleasure by holding in tension the theology of the cross and the theology of Ecclesiastes. While the authors in these books have explored aspects of this dilemma, such as the ditch of pleasure, the ditch of pain, and the responses to each ditch, I believe there is still more to be said.

Therefore, it is my goal in this paper to synthesize what each of these sources offer and flesh out more fully how Christians must hold in tension pain and pleasure, the theology of the cross and the theology of Ecclesiastes, all in order to give themselves a godly perspective with which they can continually walk during their journey from this world to the world to come.

THE DITCH OF LIVING ONLY FOR PLEASURE

Humans naturally want their lives to be awesome. They want to achieve great things, craft a beautiful life, and enjoy the pleasures of the world with the people they love. The sinful human nature instinctively desires pleasure and therefore lives to fulfill this desire. Considering the life of King Solomon can help one better understand what this looks like.

The Example of Solomon

In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon acknowledges that he lived a life of pleasure. He explains how he performed an experiment to determine the value of pleasure, which he, the king of Israel and perhaps the wealthiest man to ever live, was able to do: “I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good’” (Eccl 2:1).²² Solomon enjoyed wine, folly, undertaking construction projects, designing gardens and parks, owning slaves, owning animals, possessing incredible amounts of silver and gold, and even having a harem. He spared no expense in this experiment. Anything he wanted, he had. Yet at the end, his conclusion was this: “Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (Eccl 2:11). In addition, it is reported that Solomon’s wives led him away from God, causing him to do evil in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kgs 11).

Hedonism

Ever since the fall into sin, humans have turned the blessings God gives into the goals of life. For ages, philosophers have discussed the human attitude toward pleasure and pain. Hedonism is the most notable

22. This and all Bible references in this thesis are taken from the New International Version (2011).

school of thought that pondered this question. Epicurus, the most famous representative of hedonism, wrote: “Pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and natural good; starting from pleasure we accept or reject; and we return to this as we judge every good thing, trusting this feeling of pleasure as our guide.”²³ Epicurus valued pleasure and believed that life was at its best when thinking about how to make one’s life the most pleasurable and following through on this plan. It is important to note that Epicurus did not promote a life of overindulgence in drugs, sex, food, etc.²⁴ He recognized that a life of pleasure needs to be lived in moderation, because experiencing too much pleasure at once can be bad for a person and cause them pain (like a kid eating all his Halloween candy in one sitting). Hedonism proposes the maximizing of pleasure and minimizing of pain as the principle on which life should be based.

Examples of Hedonism in the Christian Life

There are several examples of hedonism that can be seen in the Christian life. First is crass hedonism, where Christians are tempted to live only for the things of this world. Second is subtle hedonism, where Christians do not realize that what they are doing in life actually betrays a leaning toward hedonism.

Crass Hedonism

Christians know that hedonism is not biblical. They have read passages like 1 John 2:15–17, which says:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

The things of this world are temporary, while the things of God are forever. However, many Christians are often tempted to put the things of this world first. Christians have been tempted to think: “If only I

23. Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*, trans. Russel M. Geer (Library of Liberal Arts, 1964), 129a.

24. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 61.

could see my team win the Super Bowl, then I could be satisfied. If only I could find a nice spouse, experience the joys of marriage, and have a nice family, then I could be content. If only I could visit twenty countries around the world, then I could be at peace.” And the list continues, never to be satisfied. Sinful humans simply “get used to better circumstances.”²⁵ This is why crass hedonism is dangerous.

Subtle Hedonism – Attitude Towards Retirement

While many Christians may recognize the dangers of such overt hedonism, there are still other ways in which Christians can fall into the ditch of living only for pleasure.

Take a person’s attitude towards retirement, for example. While the concept of retirement is relatively new due to the rise of industrialization, socialism, and increased life expectancies through medical technology, the driving force behind it is pleasure. People overwork themselves for forty years to have enough money to not need to work at the end of life (if they make it that far). They do this all for the goal of eventually being able to enjoy the pleasures of life without the interruptions of work. On the other hand, there are others who advocate for a more conscious enjoyment of life during one’s career while one still has youthful energy.²⁶

In the end, whether someone wants to overwork to enjoy life in retirement or consciously enjoy the pleasures of life during their journey to old age, pleasure is the driving force behind both. This is not to say that having pleasure be a motivating factor behind why one does something is necessarily wrong. It is simply to point out how having pleasure play such a significant role can, unfortunately, distort Christians’ views toward work and life. Work becomes not a way to contribute to society or serve others but simply a means of earning money to make one’s life more pleasurable, whether now or in the future.

25. Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, *The Good Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 50.

26. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 56, talks about this when he discusses the New Rich Movement.

Subtle Hedonism – “Lifestyle Creep”

Another example involves Christians getting swept up in the materialism of the world. Many Christians in the United States are middle-class individuals²⁷ who, in relation to much of the rest of the world, possess an extremely high standard of living. This prosperity can cause many Christians to develop a blind spot to a materialism which Christians from other countries would observe and wonder, “How can those people live with such a love for material things and still call themselves Christians?”

These Christians are not consciously trying to be hedonistic. Their lifestyle is simply a reflection of the culture they live in, a form of “lifestyle creep.”²⁸ Moreover, it is not that it is wrong to live a middle-class lifestyle with more amenities than most of the rest of the world if that is what God has blessed someone with. However, it is good for Christians to be aware of this materialistic tenet of their culture that can subtly foster within them a subtle hedonism that they never would have noticed if they did not step back and think more about their lives and their motivations behind the decisions they make.

This subtle hedonism can also manifest itself in the church. Consider offerings, for example. Christians want to give God their best and support gospel ministry in their church or school. Yet it is possible that Christians in such a materialistic society can unconsciously start to give offerings so that they themselves can benefit. For example, a Christian can donate to an upgrade of church facilities or the construction of a new athletic field, not so that God can receive their best, but rather so that they themselves, as members of the church and school, can benefit from these new upgrades. Once again, this is a dangerous influence of the materialistic culture in which these Christians live, an influence that Christians must always be on the lookout for.

27. Ryan Burge, *Graphs About Religion*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/religion-has-become-a-luxury-good>.

28. Brianna McGurran, *Experian*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/what-is-lifestyle-creep/>.

Subtle Hedonism – Personal Relationships

Another way hedonism can manifest itself in the lives of Christians is through their relationship to their family and friends. God designed the family to be the building block of society. Therefore, it is natural that people would have great love, respect, and affection for those in their immediate family.²⁹ Similarly, friends are a great blessing from God and can bring many fun-filled moments into one's life. Yet sometimes Christians can view these relationships with more importance than they should, even letting them take precedence over God.

For example, imagine that a friend or family member is living in sin and needs someone to call them to repentance. A Christian knows that if he or she says something, the relationship will be affected. The friend or family member might not look at this Christian the same. They might get mad at him or her for “judging” them. Even though they know what they must do, this Christian might want to pretend like nothing is wrong. Why is this?

Perhaps a Christian is hesitant to say something because they value pleasure too much. This might sound strange, but it seems to be true. Pleasure can also be understood as the avoidance of pain, and this is what happens in these situations. Christians want to avoid the pain of admitting that their friend or family member is not as good as they had thought. They also do not want to put themselves in the uncomfortable position of calling them out. Perhaps Christians have even misplaced their identity in this friend or family member, and calling them out would be as if they were destroying a part of themselves, causing them pain. Family and friends are great blessings from God, but they can become detrimental to a Christian if they are made into something they were never meant to be.³⁰

29. This is not always the case. In this sinful world, there are many broken families. However, according to God's design, parents and children would love and honor one another, and love and affection would naturally result.

30. This aspect of one's family comes up again later in the thesis when examining the necessity of taking up one's cross and how talks about the relationship a Christian should have with their family (Luke 14:26).

Why This is Bad

If the purpose of life is to be happy and experience the most pleasure with the least amount of pain, it makes sense that humans should fulfill this purpose by living only for pleasure and avoiding all pain. However, all Christians would probably agree that there is something about this way of life that is inherently contrary to the Bible. This may be why Christians throughout the ages have been skeptical of hedonism.³¹ Christians know that there is more to this life than just the things of this world.

Problem 1: Idolatry

First, living only for pleasure and the things of this world is idolatry. Jesus himself says, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”³² (Matt 6:24). The Apostle Paul specifically connects greed to idolatry: “No...greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph 5:5). Christians cannot live entirely for God if they are living entirely for the pleasures of this world. Furthermore, by living only for the things of this world, Christians turn the blessings God gives into gods in and of themselves. They make these blessings (the means God gives to a better life) into the purpose of life itself (the ends of life).³³

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis provides a vivid illustration of this. When the main character arrives in heaven from his bus journey from hell, he observes that most of the other people who arrived with him choose to go back to hell for various reasons. A memorable vignette involves a woman named Pam. When she arrives in heaven, the first person she seeks out is her son, Michael, who died when he was young. Pam’s grief had dominated her earthly life. She had neglected her daughter and her husband, leaving Michael’s room exactly how it was and refusing to move even though her husband and daughter

31. Paul Kleinman, *Philosophy 101* (Adams Media, 2013), 50.

32. Or the pleasures of this world that money can buy.

33. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 160.

could not stand remaining in the old house. She had an idolatrous love for her son and placed him above God. She was “treating God only as a means to Michael.”³⁴ She demonstrates this when she says:

I do not believe in a God who keeps mother and son apart. I believe in a God of Love. No one has a right to come between me and my son. Not even God. Tell Him that to His face. I want my boy, and I mean to have him. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever.³⁵

Rather than seeing God as the most important thing in her life or trusting that God may have taken Michael away to heaven for his own spiritual good,³⁶ she shows that she is only concerned about her son.

While this is an extreme example, this attitude should be a warning to Christians. Do they (whether consciously or unconsciously) place things in this world, such as spouse, children, parents, food, drink, events, travel, entertainment, etc., above the God who gave all these things to them? Such an unhealthy love for the world leads one away from God. As C. S. Lewis said, “Prosperity knits a man to the World. He feels that he is ‘finding his place in it,’ while really it is finding its place in him.”³⁷

Problem 2: The Absence of Meaning

Second, living for pleasure is a problem because it is too short-sighted. Doing so does not provide one with the proper framework for viewing reality, both on this earth and ultimately in eternity. Fundamental problems arise when living for the things of this world: What happens when life is not pleasurable? What happens when one places all one’s hopes and dreams in the things of this world and then those things disappear?³⁸ Or what happens when one dies and leaves the pleasures of this world behind? If one’s hope and purpose in life is based 100 percent on the things of this world, then one’s life has no lasting meaning.

34. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 92.

35. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 95.

36. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 92.

37. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 132.

38. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 63.

Thompson identifies two basic types of meaning in life. First is short-term meaning. Something has short-term meaning only as long as someone values it.³⁹ Short-term meaning is therefore only temporary.⁴⁰ Either the object being valued will disappear, or the person valuing it will stop valuing it, whether by choice or by death. Second is cosmic meaning. Thompson explains: “To say that the universe has cosmic meaning is to say that it has what we’ll call a *metanarrative*. A metanarrative is simply an overarching or transcendent story or idea within which all other stories or ideas fit and are legitimized or explained.”⁴¹ As one will see, viewing oneself within God’s metanarrative is essential for true and lasting meaning in life.

For the Christian, living only for pleasure is meaningless. Sure, the things of this world might have short-term meaning on their own, but when they disappear or when the Christian dies, any meaning these things once had goes away. Living only for pleasure is a life without God, and without God, there is no true or lasting meaning.

Problem 3: Not Authentic Christianity

The third problem with living only for the things of this world is that doing so does not reflect an authentic Christianity. In other words, one must live with an aversion to pain and suffering if one is going to live fully for pleasure and the things of this world. Such an attitude sounds like the Apostle Peter when he tried to persuade Jesus against going to Jerusalem to suffer:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Matt 16:21–23).

39. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 5.

40. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 7.

41. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 12.

Peter had an attitude that believed the life of a Christian should be glorious and free from suffering. This, too, is the attitude that Christians have when they let their sinful flesh win out. The problem with this attitude is that living in such a manner results in a fake Christianity.

Jesus further defined the reality of an authentic Christian life immediately after scolding Peter:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Matt 16:24–26).

What Jesus describes in these verses is what Christians call the theology of the cross. Martin Luther was perhaps the first theologian to really articulate the truth of this doctrine and how it applies to the life of the Christian. In his Heidelberg Disputation, he said:

That person is not worthily called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as understood through those things that have been made [Rom 1:20], but the one who understands the visible and posterior things of God [Exod 33:23] as seen through sufferings and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross says what a thing is.⁴²

All humans are by nature theologians of glory. They, like Peter, want glory now. Even while many humans (unbelievers included) are willing to endure considerable amounts of pain for a delayed gratification, their motivation for doing so is that they believe it will result in even greater pleasure, joy, or glory (however that may look to them). They believe that true glory can be found in this world. Finding this glory and making it a part of their life, therefore, becomes the motivation behind everything they do.

Theologians of the cross, on the other hand, realize that God does not work the way humans expect. Like Jesus, who, through the worst evil of all time (the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God), brought about the greatest good of all time (the salvation of the world), so also God produces good through the sufferings that take place in the lives of his children.

This is why avoiding the Christian cross and living only for pleasure and the things of this world is necessarily bad and harmful. Just as God brought about salvation through the suffering of Jesus, so also

42. Martin Luther, “Theses for The Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther’s Works: Disputations I*, vol. 72, ed. Paul R. Hinlicky and Eric G. Phillips, trans. Eric G. Phillips, Luther’s Works (Concordia, 2025), 90.

through the sufferings in their lives, God leads Christians to rely more on Jesus, their only way to salvation. Unlike what the human sinful nature wants to believe, with God, there is a positive value to suffering. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, “God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴³ God can use the suffering of the Christian to remind them that this world is not their true home and to strengthen them on their journey to heaven. And so, a Christianity that wants to avoid suffering is a Christianity that diminishes the importance of the eternal. A Christianity that lives only for pleasure is a Christianity that misunderstands God and how the things in God’s world actually work.

Examining One’s Attitude

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus warned that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). In this parable, a rich man had been living only for the things of this world. He had been so focused on building for himself a great life on earth that he forgot about God and the eternal realities of heaven and hell. That very night, God came and demanded his life from him. All he had worked for vanished instantly, and because he forgot about God, his lack of faith landed him in eternal torment. When Christians forget about God and live only for this world, they lose everything. They are no longer authentic Christians.

In reality, most people who call themselves Christians have not totally forgotten about God like the rich fool. However, this parable of Jesus warns Christians about the danger of getting distracted by the things of the world and losing their focus on God and what is truly important. Once someone forgets about God, they have already lost everything. It is essential, therefore, for Christians to assess their attitudes on how they view life. Are they truly focused on the ultimate goal of eternity with God? Or are

43. Joshua H Jones, “The Relationship between Tentatio/Anfechtung, the Vita Passiva, and the Missio Dei in Luther’s Theology of the Cross,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 32, no. 2 (2024): 133, ATLAiACO250404000387.

they distracted by the pleasures of this world? Are they authentic theologians of the cross? Or are they inauthentic theologians of glory?

To examine their attitudes, it might be good for Christians to ask themselves: “How do I view the ever-approaching Last Day?” Christians must remember that it is a possibility that God comes again during their lifetime. Do they eagerly anticipate that day? Or deep down, do they wish that God would hold off coming back to bring them to be with him forever until they have had more time to enjoy the things of this world and craft a better life for themselves?

In his essay *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis says: “He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only.”⁴⁴ It is crucial for Christians to keep this essential truth in mind during their time on this earth. Yes, the blessings of this world are nice, but they are not the ultimate goals of life. Christians always need to be focused on God and place him first in their lives. Christians must stay focused on the end goal of the world to come. To continually have such a focus, it is essential to stay connected to the means of grace. God’s word and sacraments convince Christians of this truth and make them into true theologians of the cross, not fake theologians of glory.

44. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 7.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DILEMMA

When Christians realize that living only for the pleasures of this world is truly dangerous, they might overreact and go too far in the other direction. They might think that because Christians must be theologians of the cross, the Christian life should therefore consist only of suffering. For them, Christians should only live for pain and not seek out or enjoy any pleasure. Here are some examples.

Misunderstanding Bible Passages About Suffering

Instead of seeing the sinful abuse of this world's pleasures as what can lead them astray, Christians can read how the Apostle John says that "everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2:16) and think that all pleasure in this world is evil in and of itself. They can read how the Apostle Peter says Christians should "not live the rest of their earthly lives for human desires, but rather for the will of God" (1 Pet 4:2) and think that anytime they, being a sinner, have a desire to enjoy something on this earth, they are desiring something that is against the will of God. They therefore become wary of these desires and shun them.

Christians can read about how Jesus talks about the necessity of hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters to be his disciple (Luke 14:26–27) and how he says, "Anyone who loves their lives will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). They can think that if they genuinely want eternal life, then they need to despair of (and even actively work against allowing into their lives) all aspirations for a good and loving family, romance, children, and really any personal goal or pleasure in life.

Even further, when Christians read how they "must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), how they should "consider it pure joy...whenever [they] face trials" (Jas

1:2), and how those who are persecuted and suffer for being a Christian are truly blessed with the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:10–12), they might conclude that if they want to end up in God’s kingdom and experience true joy, then they should not only expect their life to be nothing but hardships, but they should also seek out for themselves as much suffering and pain in this life as they are able.

Serious About Getting To Heaven

Christians can become extremely serious about getting to heaven and maintaining their relationship with God, their heavenly Father. This is a noble and godly attitude, one that Jesus himself commends on many occasions throughout the gospels.⁴⁵ However, this desire can soon morph into an all-pervasive attitude of living with a constant suspicion of the things of this world. Christians can think: “Heaven is the only thing that matters, and this world is just what I have to get through before I arrive at my true home.”⁴⁶

Take, for example, a woman who is deciding whether to marry the man she is dating. He is spiritually mature, a great leader, and has great concern for her. She enjoys being with him and is thankful for him. However, she always has this thought in the back of her head: “Is it ok that I marry this man? I know God says to put him first above all things. Could it ever happen that my love for my husband could come before my love for God?” While this woman might not have an improper love for this man, she lives with a certain uneasiness. She forgets how God created marriage to be a blessing enjoyed by humans, especially when both spouses are believers. She might even decide not to marry him because of her misunderstanding of what the Bible says about living for this world vs. living for the world to come.⁴⁷

45. See, for example, Matt 7:13–14: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

46. Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?*, 18.

47. This is not to say that one should not ask oneself these questions from time to time. It is good for Christians to make sure they have their priorities straight and see God as the most important thing in their lives. Nevertheless, living with such a sense of unease is almost certainly going too far.

Consider another example. A man is blessed financially and can realize his goal of travelling the world, seeing new places, and meeting people from other cultures. However, as he thinks about the danger of only living for the world, he begins to wonder: “Should I be enjoying these trips? I know God warns me about putting the things of this world above love for him and my eternal future with him. Maybe what I should do is stay at home in my country and focus on growing my relationship with God.” While enjoying a nice vacation or taking in the world God created for our enjoyment is not wrong, a misguided understanding of living for this world vs. living for the world to come causes this man to refrain from enjoying a blessing that God graciously gave to him.

Perhaps a reason why Christians fall into the ditch of living only for pain or focusing only on the world to come in this manner is that they are afraid of committing idolatry by turning the things of this world into gods. Christians know from experience how easily “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” (Mark 4:19) can lead them away from God and his word. Yet once again, this noble idea can quickly be turned into the belief that the things of this world are evil in and of themselves and that, in order to stay on the path to heaven, Christians must shun all pleasure.

Guilt Over Blessings In Life

Another way Christians can fall into the ditch of only living for pain is when they feel guilty about enjoying the blessings that God has given them in life. Rather than going to the extreme of avoiding pleasure on this earth at all costs, these Christians go ahead and enjoy pleasures in the world. However, while doing so, they have a nagging sense of guilt. They might be tempted to think they are being a “worldly” person, and if they keep enjoying things like these, they can eventually fall away from the faith. Christians who think like this cannot fully enjoy the blessings God gives them.

While shunning all pleasure and having guilt while enjoying earthly pleasures are two different things, they are similar in the sense that both come from an attitude that wants to avoid idolatry but takes it too far. This noble desire can soon turn into a subtle form of idolatry itself, where Christians think they know better than the God who gave them all these blessings in the first place. Wittmer explains: “There

are two ways to ruin our relationship with the Giver of all things. The first is to ignore him and focus entirely on his gifts...The second way is to ignore the gift and focus entirely on the Giver.”⁴⁸ To say one knows better than God by justifying why one should not enjoy the blessings God gives them “betrays a false spirituality that imagines God is somehow pleased by a renunciation of the beautiful gift of his creation.”⁴⁹ If God gives Christians earthly blessings, Christians should express their thankfulness by enjoying these blessings from God.

Perpetual Pessimism

Christians may also manifest the ditch of living only for pain by an attitude of perpetual pessimism.⁵⁰ While these Christians might not actively be wary of the things of this world, knowing the necessity of suffering and the theology of the cross in the Christian life could lead them to think that this world must always be gloomy. Therefore, if life is ever good for them, these Christians believe that they should not get too comfortable. Suffering will eventually come, as Jesus promised, and they need to be ready.

An example might look like this: A Christian finally makes it out of a decade-long struggle with finances. Now, instead of wondering how she is going to get by, she has more than she knows what to do with. But instead of thanking God for strengthening her reliance on him through that struggle and for now blessing her financially, this Christian has a nagging sense of preoccupation that says: “Sure, God helped me through that tough time, but I just know that sooner or later more rough times will inevitably come.” Instead of being present in the moment and living day by day with trust in God, this Christian cannot stop worrying about what might happen in the future.

48. Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?*, 65.

49. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 160.

50. Michael R. Emlet, “Futility, Meaning, and Life under the Sun: Ecclesiastes for Everyday Life,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 37, no. 1 (2023): 15, ATLAiREM230429000634. In Emlet’s own words, he describes this as an attitude of “daily dread.”

Or take another Christian whose family has a history of a chronic illness. Although he himself has not been diagnosed, he lives every day with dread that maybe today will be the day when this disease finally catches him and turns his life upside down. And so instead of living in the moment and enjoying the blessings that God gives him, he lives with constant worry of what could happen in the future.

Many Christians have developed this gloomy attitude because of the pain of their past. The sins, hurts, or sicknesses of the world have caused them to experience one suffering after another, to be on the wrong side of injustice, to survive a great tragedy, or to be victimized. When they read about suffering in the Christian life, they think that this is just how life is supposed to be. Sin and its effects wear people down and cause them to view the world as unsafe and cruel.⁵¹ They develop such pessimistic attitudes as a sort of defense mechanism.⁵² by setting themselves up for disappointment so that if/when pain or suffering happens, they will not be disappointed or surprised.⁵³ However, this behavior betrays a lack of trust in God (Matt 6:25–34), who promises to work everything out for his children’s good and provide what they need. It can also cause someone to misunderstand God as well as what he teaches about suffering and blessings in his word. Because of this, these Christians cannot live life as God intended.

Overworking/Self-Inflicted Suffering

Another way that living only for pain can manifest itself is through what Emlet calls “overworking for the kingdom.”⁵⁴ This can happen when Christians burn themselves out doing work for the church, spreading

51. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 115.

52. Another defense mechanism can be anticipating bad things so as to avoid them or lessen their effects. If someone is always anticipating a stock market crash, when the crash happens, they might be better prepared to deal with it, thereby lessening their suffering. However, this attitude also betrays a lack of trust in God. They see suffering as something they can dictate rather than trusting in God and leaving it all in his hands. (This is not to say Christians should not plan for disaster, just that they should not obsess over the worst happening.)

53. Theodorus Yoder, *Medium*, 11 January 2025, <https://medium.com/@theodorusyoder/expect-disappointment-and-youll-never-be-disappointed-how-true-is-that-e589369e9805>. For those fans of *Spider-Man*, this is like what the character MJ says in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*: “Expect disappointment, and you’ll never be disappointed.”

54. Emlet, “Futility, Meaning, and Life under the Sun,” 13.

the gospel, or serving others with the love of Christ. In their hearts, these Christians think they are doing a good thing because they are serving God. For them, it is almost as if the ends of serving God justify the means (sinful though they are) of not taking care of oneself.⁵⁵

A Christian might work a long day at the office, skip dinner to make it to the church for the women's group meeting, and get home late with no time left to spend with her family. Similarly, a pastor might spend eighty hours a week on his sermon, Bible studies, shut-ins, evangelizing, counseling, personal Bible study, and many other things that in and of themselves are great ways to use time and serve God. But if they continually come at the expense of taking care of one's health or spending time with one's family, they become sinful, even though living like this may seem noble.

This overworking for the kingdom can also take place in daily life and Christian vocation, apart from work done for the church. For example, a mother or father can see how noble a task caring for their children truly is. However, they can wrongly conclude that God has called them to a life of over-the-top busy labor and sacrifices for their children, and that if they ever spend time on themselves or enjoy pleasures in this world, they are not fulfilling their calling as a parent. Such Christians could perhaps unwittingly use their vocation as a parent as an excuse to justify not spending time on other important things, such as time with their spouse, aging parents, or personal study of God's word.

In overworking for the kingdom, both in the church and in one's daily vocation, the common problem is one of identity. Christians must always find their identity in being God's child. When they begin to find their worth only in how well they serve God in their vocations or how well they make it through life's suffering or hardships, something is off. Christians should not view themselves as so indispensable that the lives of those they serve cannot go on without them. Jesus has said that being his

55. Here, it is important to note that sometimes in life it is necessary to overwork oneself in one's vocation out of Christian love for another person. But this is only done for a time and is not seen as a usual way of life.

disciple would be difficult (Matt 16:24–25). Yet Christians must remember that when the Bible talks about the necessity of suffering in the Christian life, it never once advocates for self-inflicted suffering.⁵⁶

Why This is Bad

After exploring how the ditch of living only for the world to come (or living only for pain) looks, it is important to note how doing so is dangerous for three reasons: 1) It is a distortion of the theology of the cross; 2) It leads to a distortion/ignorance of one's vocation in life; 3) It causes one to misunderstand who God is and what he says about earthly blessings and their enjoyment. In all these pitfalls, the devil's work can be seen as he tries to derail Christians on their journey to heaven.

Problem 1: Misunderstanding the Theology of the Cross

We have already seen how Luther, in his Heidelberg Disputation, explains that just as God hides himself in weakness, so also true glory is found in the cross. He says, "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross says what a thing is."⁵⁷

Deutschlander defines the theology of the cross as "that study of the Word of God that looks for the connection between [Jesus'] cross and ours."⁵⁸ He further explains how the cross of a Christian "is everything that I suffer as a result of my connection and faithfulness to Christ and his Word. At its heart and core it is a denial of self in favor of Christ and his Word."⁵⁹ Self-denial—putting my will behind God's will and putting the needs of others before mine—is essential to this theology.⁶⁰

56. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 17. (Once again, this is different than the suffering which Christians take on for the good of others. This is necessary from time to time and is a cross Christians must bear.)

57. Luther, "Theses for The Heidelberg Disputation," 90.

58. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 32.

59. Daniel M. Deutschlander, "Don't Be Afraid! Cheer Up! It's the Cross! Part I," paper presented at North Atlantic District Convention and Arizona–California District Convention, 2010, 7, <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/1165>.

60. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Your Kingdom Come* (Northwestern, 2021), 244.

Deutschlander goes on to describe what exactly the cross looks like in the life of a Christian: the cross is a necessary consequence of following Jesus; the Christian cross is heavy and painful; the cross involves the Christian's will; and the cross produces true joy. While the cross of the Christian is different than the redemptive cross of Jesus, both are always connected in the sense that the crosses of Christians bring them back or closer to Christ, whose cross is their only hope of salvation.⁶¹ Crosses are not bad or evil (although they can appear to be) because they result in blessings for the Christian. God uses the cross to strengthen the Christian's faith and guide him or her to the ultimate goal of eternity with him.

The problem with having a mindset that only lives for pain is that this distorts the theology of the cross. God is the one who sends crosses; Christians do not seek them out themselves. Cross-bearing "is not the self-chosen poverty of the monk or the solitude of the hermit. It is not the celibacy inflicted by the papacy on those who wish to serve in the public ministry. Rather, it is the self-denial that lives in submission to the law of God, in works of service to one's neighbor out of love for Christ."⁶²

In reality, the mindset of living only for pain can make the theology of the cross into a theology of glory. Forde explains that "the theology of the cross turns very easily into a negative theology of glory. Our occasional pain becomes our good work."⁶³ A Christian can be tempted to glorify their sufferings and thereby lose sight of Christ. The more they suffer, the more they feel a subtle sense of glory and pride, especially in today's culture of victimization. In the end, for the suffering of Christians to truly be counted as a cross, it must always be connected to Christ and have his salvific suffering in view. These crosses always produce humility, never pride. These crosses are always meant to lead the Christian back to Christ to depend on him and his work ever more strongly.

It is not difficult to see how this misunderstanding of suffering and the theology of the cross led to monasticism. Many monks wanted to avoid getting enthralled by the things of this world and stay

61. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 2–12.

62. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 17.

63. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 83.

focused on the path to heaven. For many, becoming a monk involved leaving society (to certain degrees), zealously studying the Bible, and living in simple communities with other monks. Initially, this started out as a fine desire. But unfortunately, throughout history, monasticism grew into activities that monks *themselves* did to stay on the path to heaven. For many, it even turned into a belief that they could merit their own salvation with God by virtue of their suffering (AC XXVII).⁶⁴ And while they started out with the goal to learn more about God, soon their suffering took center stage, and they lost sight of Christ and his saving cross. The Reformers describe this in the Augsburg Confession:

Furthermore, whoever was so ensnared and ended up in the monastery learned little about Christ...They pretend that the monastic life is of such a nature that through it a person may earn God's grace and righteousness before God—indeed that it is a state of perfection, far above all other walks of life instituted by God. (AC XXVII)⁶⁵

The “crosses” of these monks were not actual crosses because their “crosses” were set up in place of Christ’s cross. This same type of thinking is present in Christians who misunderstand what the Bible says about suffering and who incorrectly elevate pain and diminish pleasure. Even though these Christians may not join a monastery, like the monks of old, they distort the theology of the cross when they actively impose suffering on themselves and think that by doing so, they ensure their place in the world to come.⁶⁶

Problem 2: Distortion/Neglect of Vocation

Monasticism was also harmful because it caused people to forget about their Christian vocation and the important responsibilities they had in their day-to-day life. The Reformers describe this:

Many examples are recorded of people leaving wife and child—even their civil office—and putting themselves into a monastery. This, they said, is fleeing from the world and seeking a life that is more pleasing to God than the other life. They were unable to realize that one should serve

64. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress, 2000), 82.

65. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 82.

66. This type of thinking can also show up when Christians misinterpret certain hymns and take them to a place the author never intended. See “Appendix: Hymns” for some examples of this.

God by observing the commandments he has given and not through the commandments contrived by human beings (AC XXVII).⁶⁷

While one may not see many Christians today becoming monks or hermits, this mindset is still at the heart of the ditch of living only for pain and can cause one to fail to serve others in their vocations.

Vocation refers to the different callings that people have in which they can serve God and their neighbor. God calls some to be pastors and teachers, yes, but he also calls people to be fathers and mothers, farmers, clerks, bus drivers, doctors, etc. Luther often emphasized the importance of vocation in his writings. Contrary to the Roman Catholic Church, which elevated the calling of clergy above that of regular people, Luther pointed out how no vocation is more important than another. A pastor serving to the best of his ability is no more valuable to God than a mother serving faithfully in her role. In his tract *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther described the importance of serving one's neighbor—not to gain God's favor, but rather because he or she is thankful for having been justified. He said:

Therefore, just as God helped us gratuitously through Christ, so we should do nothing else than help our neighbor through our body and its works. Thus we see how a Christian life is a highly noble life, though unfortunately it is not only cast aside throughout the whole world, but is also no longer known or preached.⁶⁸

Serving God by simply living a Christian life is very valuable to God. God works through Christians to provide for not only his children but also the rest of those on earth.⁶⁹

Therefore, just as the monks of old left society and the opportunities to serve their neighbors in everyday life, so also Christians who misunderstand the theology of the cross can withdraw from being in a position where they can bless their neighbor. They can begin to view their vocations in a distorted manner and think that suffering for the kingdom of God justifies their ignorance of other vocations. God has called each Christian to a unique position in life, and when Christians impose suffering on themselves, they can blind themselves to these opportunities of service that God has given them.

67. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 90.

68. Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, ed. Tryntje Helfferich (Hacker, 2013), 39.

69. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 102.

Problem 3a: A Distortion of God's Character

This ditch of living only for pain is also dangerous because such a pessimistic attitude can cause one to misunderstand who God is. A Christian can come to believe that if they ever do experience good things or pleasures in the world, God is just playing with them or setting them up so that he can remove these blessings sooner than later and bring more suffering into their lives.⁷⁰ Instead of getting mad or disappointed that they cannot enjoy good things like “those other people in their lives,” they go back to thinking: “Suffering ultimately is good for me, so I should not be frustrated. I know that God is looking out for me by taking the good out of my life and replacing it with continuous suffering.” This is dangerous because it mischaracterizes God as a God who messes with his children.

The theology of the cross shows Christians that suffering is good, even if the evidence does not seem to indicate it. Christians know that God uses suffering to strengthen their faith and keep them focused on him. When pessimism causes Christians to view their existence in an entirely negative light, they can start to view God and the crosses he sends in a negative manner as well.

Problem 3b: An Ignorance of what God says about Earthly Blessings

Living only for pain is not correct because it turns God's blessings into inherently bad things and prevents Christians from enjoying the pleasures that God actually wants them to enjoy. Christians must remember that it is not the things of this world that are evil. Rather, it is a misuse of the things of this world, a turning of the “means” God provided for a better life into the “ends” of life.⁷¹

When God created the world, he created it with many blessings. Take his institution of marriage in Gen 2:18–24, for example. God did not create the blessings of marriage (companionship, sex, and children) to be temptations to lead Adam and Eve away from him. Instead, God in his love provided these blessings of marriage to be enjoyed by Adam and Eve in his presence. The same can be said of the food,

70. Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, 121.

71. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 160.

drink, climate, and landscapes of the world before the fall into sin. Everything was perfect. God created all these things for Adam and Eve to enjoy simply because he loved them.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, it was their sinful self-centeredness that ruined their perfect relationship with God by turning the blessings God had given them into more than what they were meant to be. The same is true for Christians today. Their sinful nature wants to replace God with the things he gives them, even though these things are not inherently evil in and of themselves. As Deutschlander explains: “[God] does not tell us to despise the world in an absolute sense... He warns us against a love of the world that takes precedence over and is in opposition to a love for God.”⁷² With God in first place in their lives, it is possible (and even encouraged/commanded by God) for Christians to properly enjoy the blessings God provides in this world.

The book of Ecclesiastes has a great deal to offer this discussion with its insights into earthly blessings and the attitude of the Christian toward them. Throughout Ecclesiastes, there are several passages (often referred to as *carpe diem* passages⁷³) that have a common theme of encouraging believers to enjoy the things of this world.

In these passages Solomon advocates for the enjoyment of food and drink (2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7), one’s work (2:24; 3:13; 3:22; 5:18; 5:19), wealth and possessions (5:19), and one’s spouse (9:9). Solomon even says that there is nothing better in life than enjoying one’s life and having joy and gladness (8:15). These passages strike an interesting chord because Christians often equate the Bible with telling them not to go after the things of this world. This is true in part, but the Bible also speaks about things of this world as blessings from God. In these so-called *carpe diem* passages Solomon describes pleasures that relate to every part of the Christian’s life: physical, relational, spiritual, and vocational.⁷⁴

72. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 161.

73. Jonathan Bourman and Timothy Bourman, hosts, *The Notable Podcast*, season 7, episode 4, “Carpe Diem,” The Notable Podcast, November 4, 2021, 1 hr., 03 min., 19 sec., <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.

74. Bourman and Bourman, “Carpe Diem.”

A Christian might wonder: “Why should I enjoy these blessings?” Solomon gives the answer: These blessings are from God himself (2:24). In fact, they are gifts from God (3:13)! As a loving Father, God wants his children to enjoy the blessings he has given them.⁷⁵ Solomon further explains that one does not know what will happen in life (3:22). Therefore, why should Christians live with worry? Why should they not live by enjoying the daily blessings God gives?

It is true that life can be difficult. Every Christian knows and has experienced this. But rather than making his children dwell on and deal with the difficulties of life all the time, God sends blessings to keep them occupied with gladness of heart (5:20) and help them through the days of toil that he has assigned (8:15). Solomon is not advocating for escapism here. He is simply pointing out God’s love. Even in the most painful sufferings that may last a lifetime, there are still moments of joy that God sends as blessings to his children simply because he loves them.

A Christian might also ask: “How can I enjoy these blessings? How do I know this is what God wants for me?” Solomon points out how God only gives these blessings to the “person who pleases him” (2:26). Pleasing God does not mean doing something to gain his favor. Rather, Christians please God because of what Jesus did for them. When God looks at his children, he sees Jesus’ perfection. The doctrine of justification is essential here. Solomon says: “God has already approved what you do” (9:7). Because of Jesus, Christians are right with God. They do not have to fear an angry God. God approves of his children enjoying the blessings he gives them. This frees Christians to have a proper enjoyment of the blessings on this earth. God, in his grace, not only gives believers blessings, but he also gives them the ability to enjoy these blessings (5:19).

Unbelievers, on the other hand, do not have this ability. They do not please God because they are sinners who do not trust in Jesus for salvation. They view the things of this world as the ends of life and therefore do not possess the ability to truly enjoy these pleasures. Sure, they can “enjoy” the pleasures of this world, but there will always be something lacking for them because they view this earth’s pleasures

75. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 71.

as more than they were ever meant to be. The ability to enjoy the blessings God gives is a gift from God that accompanies faith in Jesus. Without faith, it is impossible to truly enjoy blessings as God intends.

If God gives his children not only the ability to enjoy earthly blessings but also a reason to enjoy them, there is no debate that having a mindset that lives only for pain is incorrect and sinful. When Christians fall into this ditch and make the things of this world inherently evil, they distort who God is as well as his will for their earthly lives.

The Devil's Goal Through It All

In the end, all these pitfalls into the ditch of living only for pain reflect how the devil would like nothing more than for Christians to despise this world entirely and turn into ungrateful children of God who miss out on opportunities to serve others. The devil wants all Christians to fall into a depression where they lose all hope and become cynical. He also wants Christians to resent God and think of him as a cruel God who owns everything in the world but wants to make his children suffer by not letting them enjoy any pleasure in life, kind of like a billionaire father who does not want to share his wealth with his children.

The Apostle Paul talks about some of these influences of the devil in 1 Tim 4:1–5:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons... They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Even in Paul's time, there were people saying that marriage and enjoying certain foods were sinful. This same attitude appeared in monasticism and still appears today when Christians focus exclusively on the world to come to the neglect of this present life. The devil wants Christians to worry about falling off the path to heaven and take matters into their own hands by imposing suffering on themselves. This results in an ungratefulness for God's gifts and, at the same time, prevents Christians from experiencing the joy and thankfulness that come from properly enjoying the pleasures that God gives them. The devil who ruined perfection is the same devil who not only wants to make the journey to heaven as unenjoyable as possible for Christians but ultimately wants to snatch them off the path to this eternal goal if he can

THE MIDDLE GROUND

It is clear that the two ditches of living only for pleasure/living only for this world and living only for pain/living only for the world to come are very far apart. How, then, does a Christian find the middle ground between living only for this world and living only for the world to come?

A Solomon-like Realization

To begin, it is necessary for the Christian to come to a Solomon-like Ecclesiastes realization. This often is not a big one-time realization, but rather the by-product of many years of disappointment with the world that results in seeing God as the only one who gives life true meaning.

Christians, guided by what God says in his word, need to realize that this earth will never be what they want it to be. Many Christians find themselves gravitating toward an idolatrous love of the world.⁷⁶ However, this ditch of living only for the pleasures of this world is dangerous because it gives Christians false hopes. They imagine a wonderful (yet unrealistic) future, only to be unprepared to meet the hardships in the world, have their pleasures taken away from them, or die and have all their hopes disappear. And so, to not fall into this ditch, it is necessary for Christians to despair of any earthly gain.

Properly Hating One's Life

Solomon attests to the importance of seeing life this way: "So I hated life" (Eccl 2:17). Solomon lived his entire life running after the things of this world, but ultimately realized that "everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Eccl 2:11). Without God, nothing in this world could satisfy him eternally.

76. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 159–79.

Most Christians have probably experienced this. They have had great goals for their lives, only for their dreams not to live up to their expectations or not to be fulfilled at all. Humans will always want more than they have. Solomon understood that “the eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing” (Eccl 1:8). Chasing after the things of this world will never result in anything other than disappointment. Storing up treasures on earth is not a wise idea because, as Jesus warns, these things do not last (Matt 6:19), and they will never deliver on their promise to satisfy humans. Earthly blessings are simply a means to an end, not the end of life itself.⁷⁷ Without God, humans cannot find true satisfaction.

Christians must learn to hate their lives (in the biblical sense of the word) as Solomon did. Jesus speaks about the importance of properly hating one’s life on multiple occasions: “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:20); and, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Arndt explains the significance of this phrase: “‘Hating’ signifies ‘loving less.’ ... Jesus is to have our highest love; we have to be so dedicated to Him that by comparison it might appear as if we hated those near and dear to us.”⁷⁸

Focusing on the Goal of Heaven

Just like Solomon, Christians need to experience life from the perspective of “under the sun” and see the meaninglessness of life without God so that they can eventually look at life from “above the sun” and see how God gives their life epic meaning.⁷⁹ This proper hatred of the world eventually results in Christians viewing life from a more heavenly perspective, as God wants them to do:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col 3:1–4).

77. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 160.

78. William F. Arndt. *Luke* (Concordia, 1986), 344.

79. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 135–36.

To help his children focus on the fact that their true citizenship lies in heaven (Phil 3:19–20), God provides previews of eternity with him in the Bible. Some ways that the Bible describes eternity with God are: 1) A glorious banquet (Isa 25:6–9); 2) A mansion with many rooms (John 14:2); 3) New heavens and a new earth (Isa 65:17–25; Rev 21:1–8); 4) The glory of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:9–27); 5) The Garden of Eden restored (Rev 22:1–5); and 6) The absence of anything negative humans experience in this world (Rev 7:16–17). While these are only some of the Bible’s many descriptions of the world to come, each one helps Christians see that the glory of eternity with God is far superior to any “glory” on this earth.⁸⁰ These passages, therefore, help Christians direct their focus to eternity with God and put their earthly lives into the proper perspective. The author to the Hebrews describes this outlook: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14).

In a way, the answer to finding the narrow middle ground begins by swerving out of the ditch of pleasure and driving towards the opposite ditch of pain, or, in other words, properly hating this world and having a mindset that anticipates the perfect world to come. While Christians might come close to the opposite ditch of pain, they do not want to get stuck in that ditch where they despair of earth in the way that the cynics and nihilists do. Despairing of one’s life in the way Solomon and Jesus describe is always coupled with a trust in God and his promises. Christians do despair of the world in the sense that they do not try to find their ultimate satisfaction and meaning in this world. However, Christians do not despair of the world in the sense that they give up and just try to get out of this world as quickly as they can. They know that God gives this world meaning, and they understand that they still have a purpose on earth.

80. This is interesting to think about: In *The Weight of Glory*, 4, C. S. Lewis says that the reason earthly pleasures appeal to humans is that they reflect the true glory that is found with God in heaven. He says,

If a transtemporal, transfinite good is our real destiny, then any other good on which our desire fixes must be in some degree fallacious, must bear at best only a symbolical relation to what will truly satisfy... The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them...for they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

Seeing One's Place Within God's Metanarrative

Despairing of this world in a proper sense and meditating on eternity with God helps Christians begin to understand their place in God's metanarrative. Once again, a metanarrative, as Thompson explains, "is simply an overarching or transcendent story or idea within which all other stories or ideas fit and are legitimized or explained."⁸¹ Understanding the metanarrative of this universe is important for a person to understand why what is happening to them and everyone else in the world is significant.⁸² When a Christian reads the Bible and understands the structure of its message, they will see that the entire Bible is really one big story (or metanarrative). Without this story and without God, everything about life in this world is meaningless, as Ecclesiastes demonstrates. But by seeing oneself within God's grand story, Christians realize that everything has meaning, both eternally and even now in the present.

From Eden to Eden

When Christians have a Solomon-like realization and repeatedly witness the shortcomings of this world, they are reminded that all of this is a result of sin and the work of the devil; things were not always this way. God created earth as a perfect world, as was evident in the Garden of Eden. But all was lost with the fall into sin. Now it is impossible to go back to Eden. "What is crooked cannot be straightened" (Eccl 1:15). "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it" (Rom 8:20). Humans now live outside of perfection, or "east of Eden,"⁸³ so to speak. When God cursed the world after the fall into sin, there was no return. Life is not what it once was. If Christians live like the world is still what it was before the Fall, they will run into problems like Solomon did.

81. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 12.

82. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 12.

83. Jonathan Bourman and Timothy Bourman, hosts, *The Notable Podcast*, season 7, episode 2, "East of Eden," The Notable Podcast, October 14, 2021, 1 hr., 06 min., 30 sec., <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.

But the rest of God's grand story in the Bible shows that God is gracious. After the fall into sin, God cursed Satan. And then he promised a Savior—Jesus, his only Son—to restore Eden (Gen 3:15). Jesus came to earth and experienced the human existence, not to provide humans an escape from their meaningless existence, but to redeem their lives and give meaning to their existence.⁸⁴ He lived in this broken world just like every other human. And he kept the commandments of God where Adam, Eve, and every other human had failed. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled God's original gospel promise (Gen 3:15) by crushing the head of Satan and defeating death—the preeminent consequence of losing Eden. By making humans right with God, Jesus restored Eden to humans by winning for them the new heavens and the new earth—the new Eden (Isa 66; Rev 21–22). Jesus and his work give true meaning and purpose to the lives of Christians. He rescues them from the meaninglessness of this world.⁸⁵

When Christians, through the power of God's word, have their eyes directed to eternity with God, they see how God will one day bring the sadness and brokenness of this world to an end. Christians also see how the connection between the Eden lost and the new Eden is the cross of Christ. In the middle of God's grand story from paradise lost to paradise regained stands this cross, the most important event that ever happened. The innocent Son of God was killed for the sins of the whole world. And he rose to guarantee the whole world of their justification before God. Everyone who believes in Jesus is a recipient of this blessing. Christians, therefore, know that although they live in a world broken by sin, they will one day make it back to Eden in the new heavens and the new earth.

True Joy and A Life to the Full

With this metanarrative in their minds, Christians see everything in the world begin to take on new meaning. If God has eternity secured, Christians should not withdraw from society, waiting for the end of the world. Rather, they should be encouraged and see their lives as truly meaningful and epic.

84. Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, 113.

85. Emlet, "Futility, Meaning, and Life under the Sun," 18.

Whether or not they consider themselves hedonists, all humans are searching for pleasure and true joy in life. They want a good life, “a life characterized by a *payoff*.”⁸⁶ Unfortunately, many humans confuse earthly pleasure in and of itself with true joy. Since all humans are “terrible at knowing what is good for them”⁸⁷ (and since all humans are sinners who cannot come to know God unless he reveals himself to them), they will never find true joy among the things of this world.

Many people (including Christians) say: “God just wants me to be happy.” However, they often use this phrase as an excuse for hedonism or as justification for seeking out whatever they want in this world, even if these things are sinful or lead them away from God. Such people believe that God only exists to make their lives better. It can be argued that this is especially influenced by the fairy-tale Disney culture present in our society, which can cause people to think that God, as the author of their lives, will make all the bad things in life go away and work out a perfect ending, just like any Disney romance.

This type of thinking is not correct because it places one’s own will over God’s will and makes God into a type of genie. Because this type of thinking is disconnected from God’s metanarrative, it does not account for suffering and can be used to justify having a hedonistic mindset. This type of thinking is emblematic of those who fall into the ditch of living only for the things of this world.

On the other hand, Christians who fall into the ditch of living only for pain or who are so focused on the world to come can think that God does not want them to be happy or experience true joy, and that they should shun all earthly pleasures. This is not correct either because it mischaracterizes who God is and ignores what he says about earthly blessings in his word, as seen above.

In reality, it is true that God wants humans to be happy. However, God does not want his children to get whatever they want and call it happiness. Instead, he wants his children to have true joy that lasts forever. What God did by sending his only Son to save the world from sin and win perfection in the world

86. George M. Schwab, “Ecclesiastes and Counsel Under the Sun,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15, no. 2 (1997): 7, ATLA0001021258.

87. Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life*, 18.

to come proves this. God wants his children to have true joy, and one way he does this is by showing them that pleasure is not the purpose of life.⁸⁸ Rather, loving and serving God and one's neighbor (Eccl 12:13) and seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33) are the purposes of life.⁸⁹ As Deutschlander explains, "The bottom line of these realities is that as a Christian my goal is to present my whole life to God as a living sacrifice confident of his mercy and grace, joyful in service to him and my neighbor."⁹⁰ True, lasting joy can only be found in Jesus (John 16:22). Any other "way" to joy on earth just brings fake joy. The things of this earth disappoint, but God's joy lasts forever.

In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Clearly, the only way humans can have life to the full is through eternal life. However, there seems to be more than just eternal life in view here. Because God's metanarrative gives meaning to both eternity *and* the present, Christians truly have a full and joyful life on earth through carrying their cross, through a proper enjoyment of the pleasures of this world, and in service to others through vocation and evangelism.⁹¹

Carrying the Cross of Suffering

First, in God's metanarrative, the suffering of Christians has meaning. This is what the theology of the cross teaches. Just as Jesus suffered on a cross, so also Christians carry crosses. Christians carry these crosses in this world to remind them that just as they are not in Eden anymore, neither are they in the new Eden of heaven yet. The crosses God allows to come to his children repeatedly return Christians to Christ and his cross, the key event in God's metanarrative, and their only hope of salvation. Rather than seeing

88. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 74.

89. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 183.

90. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 146.

91. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 76, provides the inspiration for this framework. He says Christians receive true pleasure in life from three main sources: knowing the biblical metanarrative, serving others, and enjoying the pleasure of life. I add carrying one's cross and evangelism as other ways God gives Christians true joy.

suffering simply as a consequence of sin,⁹² Christians see that God works through their suffering to bring them closer to their Savior and keep them on the path to heaven.

In the life of the Christian, “suffering and joy are two sides of the same coin.”⁹³ Therefore, Christians do not run from suffering. But they do not seek it out either. They simply trust God to give them what he knows is best for them. This is similar to Paul’s attitude in 2 Cor 12:7–10:

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Deutschlander often refers to the Christian cross as “the dear cross.” He also explains a “surprising and wonderful discovery”: “We were not seeking happiness by bearing the cross, but we discover that there is no happiness without it.”⁹⁴ Finding joy in one’s suffering is authentic Christianity and is something that only Christians can do. Properly bearing one’s cross does not mean that one cannot try to eliminate suffering or alleviate the pain they experience. It simply means that, like Paul, whether or not God removes the suffering, the Christian will rejoice. They know that their crosses make them truly strong, even though they may feel extraordinarily weak. And for this, they are grateful.

The Pleasures of Life

In addition to suffering, the pleasures of life also have new meaning for Christians. Christians properly view the earthly blessings God gives as truly good things, but not things that are necessary for a good life, as hedonists would. Even though they are no longer in Eden and not yet in the new Eden, God still wants

92. Once again, not all suffering is a cross. Some suffering is simply a consequence of sin. However, all suffering can become a cross when it involves self-denial and being tempted to doubt God and his love. In every cross of self-denial, God works for the good of the Christian.

93. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 10.

94. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 106.

his children to enjoy the pleasures he gives them and “steal back Eden,”⁹⁵ as it were. The blessings they experience on earth are, on the one hand, flashbacks to what perfection was like in Eden. But they are also foreshadowings of what the new heavens and the new earth of the new Eden will be like, reminding Christians that God gives blessings to his children simply because he loves them.⁹⁶

Vocation and Evangelism

As if giving new meaning to suffering and earthly pleasures were not enough, God also gives new meaning and true joy to human work and vocation. Thompson explains:

We know all the work we do is meaningful because it flows out of God’s metanarrative. God makes the whole universe meaningful, and so the work within it *has to be* meaningful. We are not meaningful *because* we work. We work because we are meaningful, living within a meaningful world.⁹⁷

In their vocations, Christians are extensions of God to those in their lives, showing God’s love to those around them. Christians also have the privilege of proclaiming the gospel to those who still need to hear it during their time of grace. Service to others through vocation and evangelism is a source of true joy for Christians. Christians find pleasure in “giving God’s love a face and hands, sharing both his news and [their] lives with others.”⁹⁸ They thankfully serve God for all he has done for them as they serve others. Luther describes this joy this way: “For the internal man is one with God, happy and merry for the

95. Bourman and Bourman, “Carpe Diem.”

96. This is also seen after the fall into sin when God cursed the serpent and the ground (Gen 3:14–19). Absent from this narrative, notably, is any mention of God specifically cursing man. While man would have to bear the consequences of sin, there would still be opportunities to experience pleasure in the world. Women would have pain in childbirth, but they would still be able to have children. Work would be challenging, but it would still produce food for humans to enjoy. Relationships would be strained, but the relationships would still be there. And humans would one day die, but God did not strike them down right away. All this is evidence of the grace of God. God did not let the consequences of sin completely eradicate all the blessings in life. The blessings were certainly complicated but not eradicated. Not only has God won his children a perfect heaven, but he also wants to bless them even in the midst of all the brokenness and sinfulness on this earth.

97. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 99.

98. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 76.

sake of Christ, who has done so much for him, and all of his pleasure consists in also serving God in return, gratuitously and freely out of love.”⁹⁹

In the end, Christians must remember that within God’s metanarrative, everything has meaning, both in eternity and on this earth. This world is not everything, but it still has meaning. The world to come is their true home, but there are still meaningful things to do here in this world. This is the middle ground.

The Middle Ground Is Trusting God with a Childlike Faith

The key for a Christian to find the middle ground between living for pleasure and living for pain is to see oneself as God’s child. Christians can only find the middle ground between living for pleasure and living for pain when they trust in God, their heavenly Father, with a childlike faith.

Children as the Model of Faith

Jesus often uses the faith of children as the model for believers. He says, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3–4). He also says: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14).

Children are the model for faith because, first, they trust those who are older. This is not to say that children do not question things; we all have heard those young kids who repeatedly ask “why” to literally anything. However, after questioning things and hearing the response of an adult, they simply trust that it is true. This attitude is indicative of the humility children possess. They recognize that adults are adults and they are children, and that adults would know better because they have experienced more of life in this world. This is what Jesus is highlighting by calling to attention the faith of children in the

99. Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 31.

passages above. He is pushing back against those people (including the disciples) who thought that children were not that special or deserving to come near Jesus. Humility is precious in God's sight.

Second, children are entirely dependent on their parents and those older than them. They are not accustomed to providing for themselves and being able to survive on their own. The same is true about Christians. They are entirely dependent on God. They can never enter eternal life or come to faith and give themselves spiritual life on their own. Their salvation comes entirely from God.

Third, little children do not worry about things the way adults do. This is not to say that children never worry or are never concerned about problems they face in life. It simply highlights the fact that children do not have all the cares and responsibilities of the world that adults usually do. Because of this, children are free to live day by day without worry because they trust that their parents will take care of them. This faith of a child is the model faith for all Christians.

Fearing God

Ecclesiastes 12:13 can be a good summary for this attitude of a childlike faith. Solomon says, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments." Often in the English language, "to fear" is associated with "to be afraid of something." However, the biblical definition of fear in this sense is broader. While it can signify being afraid of something, it is more often used to refer to an act of reverence. "To fear God is to take God seriously, to acknowledge him in our lives as the highest good, to revere him, to honor and worship him, to center our lives on him."¹⁰⁰ In the OT, "fear" is often the equivalent of "faith," or in other words, trusting in God as one's Savior.¹⁰¹ Christians know that God is all-powerful and that they deserve his punishment. But they also know that God does not punish them because he punished Jesus on the cross in their place. God is gracious. He has freely justified them. And he promises to always be with his children (Matt 28:20). Christians, therefore,

100. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 2010), 309.

101. John Schaller, *Biblical Christology* (Northwestern, 1981), 247.

fear God and trust him to take care of them and work everything out for their eternal good (Rom 8:28).¹⁰²

In awe-filled thankfulness, Christians want to keep God's commandments (Eccl 12:13). They want to listen to Jesus' words to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...[and to] love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37, 39).

This concept of fearing God like a child might sound somewhat simplistic for the middle ground between the two polar opposites of living only for pleasure and living only for pain.¹⁰³ But it is the truth. And it is "spiritual genius."¹⁰⁴ Christians do not need to make any drastic changes to live their lives in this middle ground. It is simply their attitude that needs to change toward life and the things they already have.¹⁰⁵ Any Christian can do this. And through this, God will produce great blessings for his children on their journey from this world to the world to come.

What Does This Middle Ground Look Like?

What does it look like to fear God like a child? Here are some examples of ways in which this childlike faith demonstrates itself in the life of the Christian.

Not Worrying about the Future

In Matt 6, Jesus explains how his children do not need to worry about the future. After encouraging Christians to store up treasures in heaven and warning them against serving money (Matt 6:19–24), Jesus commands his followers not to worry. He says that if God provides for the birds and flowers what they need, he will surely provide for his children, who are much more valuable than birds or flowers (Matt

102. James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia, 2011), 209.

103. Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, 148. This solution might seem simple, but the gospel message is also simple.

104. Bourman and Bourman, "Carpe Diem."

105. Bourman and Bourman, "Carpe Diem."

6:25–32). Christians should therefore not worry but rather seek first God’s kingdom (Matt 6:33–34).¹⁰⁶ By seeking first God’s kingdom rather than the things of this world, the rest of a Christian’s life will fall into place (Matt 6:33). As Deutschlander explains, “Where the kingdom of God and his righteousness are first, everything else that we need...comes from the hand of God in due course.”¹⁰⁷ Just like a child who trusts his parents to give him what he needs, so also Christians trust God, their heavenly Father, with a childlike faith to give them what is best for them (whether pain or pleasure) at the proper time.

Therefore, Christians who trust in God with a childlike faith do not have to worry about falling off the path to heaven because God has promised that no one can snatch his sheep out of his hand (John 10:28). They do not have to think about how much pleasure or pain to allow into their lives because they trust God to allow into their lives whatever he knows is best.

Contentment

Not worrying about the future naturally leads to a spirit of contentment. When Christians trust God for their needs like a child, they do not pursue worldly pleasures as the ends of life, because they already have God who has promised, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb 13:5). They also enjoy the pleasures God gives them (rather than becoming suspicious of these pleasures or seeking out suffering) because they trust that God is a loving God who gives blessings to his children.

Contentment is not just a lack of wanting more; it is also an appreciation for what God has already given. This is true primarily with the gift God has given in Jesus and the fact that God has made his children citizens of his kingdom. But it also applies to the pleasures God allows Christians to experience on earth and the good he works through the bearing of their crosses. Deutschlander explains:

To be content with God’s gifts comes from a recognition that our goal in life, the meaning of life itself, is all wrapped up in Christ, in the gospel, in the pursuit, and yes, in the enjoyment of the kingdom of God... We recognize that this world will perish, but while we wait for that to happen,

106. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 183, explains that “the kingdom of God is by definition his gracious rule in our hearts and lives by means of his Word.”

107. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 186.

God through our labors gives what we need to survive and sometimes much more. And when we recognize as well that he promises to provide for us also in the future, then we are on the way to contentment.¹⁰⁸

This focus on God's kingdom and eternal life is similar to what the Apostle Paul says when he talks about contentment in 1 Tim 6:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Tim 6:17–19).

True treasure is not found in wealth, but rather in having a firm foundation for the coming age. This is the life that is truly life. Christians always want to be striving for the world to come and living in a way that is focused on their eternal goal. Living for wealth distracts Christians from this. In fact, living for wealth has led many others into ruin, destruction, and wandering away from the faith (1 Tim 6:9–10).

Living for wealth is additionally harmful because it is so uncertain and does not result in contentment. When Christians put their hope in God, they find contentment. They realize that just as they brought nothing into the world so they can take nothing out of the world (1 Tim 6:7). In their food and clothing, they see evidence that God has provided for them and will continue to provide everything they need (1 Tim 6:8). They also see that God provides them with everything for their enjoyment (1 Tim 6:17). Yes indeed, contentment means enjoying the blessings God has given. This might sound odd, but it is true and is similar to what Solomon advocates for in the *carpe diem* passages of Ecclesiastes.

True contentment is something only Christians can possess. Paul ties together godliness and contentment (1 Tim 6:6). It can rightly be said: “No godliness, no contentment. Know godliness, know contentment.”¹⁰⁹ Unbelievers might say they can be content without God, and this can be true (at least in part). Nevertheless, true contentment (as described in the Bible) means that one can be content in all

108. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, 174.

109. Erik Raymond, *Chasing Contentment* (Crossway, 2017), 66.

circumstances, no matter what. This is something that unbelievers cannot say because their contentment depends on their external circumstances. On the other hand, Christians who trust God and seek first his kingdom know that he will provide everything they need. They can say with the Apostle Paul: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Phil 4:12–13).

When Christians remember that God provides his children with everything they need, they can find contentment in life regardless of external circumstances. This does not mean that Christians cannot voice their pain or complaints to God about challenging life situations or seek to alleviate their suffering. It does mean that even though God might say “no” to taking away their suffering, in all circumstances Christians can have an inward spirit that “joyfully rests in God’s providence.”¹¹⁰ Christians see the preeminent display of God’s providence in Jesus’ death on the cross: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how we he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32).¹¹¹ Christians trust God like a child because they have seen proof of God’s love for them in Jesus.

Christian contentment results from a complete reliance on someone outside of themselves. This is in stark contrast to the “contentment” present in Stoicism, for example, which says that man is truly content when he can live without reliance on anyone else.¹¹² Christians who are content entirely rely on God. They take to heart and put into practice what Jesus says in Matt 11:28: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Christians know that God has taken care of the most important piece of the puzzle—their eternal salvation—and that he will work out the rest. They are therefore free to be content. Charles Spurgeon summed up this attitude of the Christian nicely:

110. Raymond, *Chasing Contentment*, 23–26.

111. Raymond, *Chasing Contentment*, 127.

112. Raymond, *Chasing Contentment*, 28.

The Christian is the most contented man in the world, but he is the least contented with the world. He is like a traveler at an inn; perfectly satisfied with the inn as an inn, but putting quite out of all consideration the idea of making it his home. He takes the comforts provided there as a traveler, thankful for them; but his desires are ever towards the journey's end, towards the better country where the many mansions are prepared.¹¹³

This attitude helps the Christian navigate the present and find the balance between living only for this world and living only for the world to come.

Living in the Moment

Not worrying about the future and being content both lead to an attitude that allows Christians to live in the moment. With a childlike faith Christians trust that God is working out their lives for their eternal good (Rom 8:28). They do not have to be defined by their past because they know that God has forgiven all their sins and hurled them into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19). Christians do not have to worry about the future because they know that God promises to take care of them (Matt 6:34). When Christians see their place in God's story—how God rescued them from the meaningless life “east of Eden” and how he has promised to give them a new Eden—then they see the present as having epic meaning.

Having a childlike faith frees up Christians to live in the present. This focus on the present is unique for Christians. Unbelievers' living in the moment often turns into escapism, or in other words, an opportunity to avoid thinking about the pain of the past and facing the uncertainty of their future and impending death. Christians, however, do not live in the present to escape the past or to avoid the

113. Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 16 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1870), 271.

future.¹¹⁴ They live in the present because they trust that God will work good out of the pain of their past and has a glorious plan for their future. They leave everything in God's hands. Only by seeing God as one's perfect and loving heavenly Father is it possible to live in the present moment.

Being present in the moment is something that children do a lot more easily than adults. Children who are dependent on their parents know that their parents are the ones who deal with the responsibilities and big things in life. Children are therefore free to enjoy life. In a similar way, Christians who know that God is in control and who trust him completely are free to enjoy the blessings that God gives them in the present. While it is not possible for adults to become children again, daily returning to a childlike faith allows Christians to still possess the peace and carefree attitude that children have.¹¹⁵ They can live life with the moment-by-moment perspective of a child rather than worrying about the past or the future. This does not mean that Christians ignore their responsibilities in life or refuse to think about their future. It simply means that Christians trust God to take care of their future and give them what they need, because he knows what is best for them.

114. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 67–68. This is what the devil wants. Lewis provides a vivid illustration of how demons want to get Christians' attention off the present and eternity with God and instead place it on their past life on earth or their future life on earth. The master tempter, Screwtape, says this regarding the present and eternity:

The humans live in time, but our Enemy destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity...He [the Enemy] would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present—either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure. Our business is to get them away from the eternal and from the present. With this in view, we sometimes tempt a human...to live in the Past...[but] it is far better to make them live in the future.

While this is a fictional account, it rings true. Christians, therefore, want to remember not only to always be focused on eternity, but also to see the present as a blessing from God. The present is meaningful only in the light of eternity.

115. This peaceful and carefree attitude is different from spiritual immaturity. Spiritual immaturity is what happens when a Christian does not care about growing in their faith and does not take spiritual things seriously. A childlike faith, on the other hand, is a faith characterized by its humility and dependence on God for salvation.

Gushiken illustrates this attitude well with an example from his life. One winter day, he received a call from his doctor telling him that he had cancer. While he was overwhelmed by the news, he explained how, instead of letting this disease limit what he could do or define him, he decided to play:

As numerous thoughts swirled around my head, I remember clearly thinking in that moment, “I might have cancer, but I am going to live, no matter how long I have left.” I quickly threw on my winter gear, opened the door, made a snowball, and threw it at one of the kids. My wife asked if I thought that was wise. I shared with her that I did not want the cancer to define me. And so I played! I am deeply thankful I did.¹¹⁶

Gushiken was able to play and enjoy the blessings God gave him in life despite his circumstances because he knew that God would produce good from his cancer. He did not let his cancer define his identity, limit his enjoyment of God’s blessings in life, or cause him to live with a perpetual pessimism. He knew that his eternal future was secure, and this gave him the freedom to play and enjoy life in the way God intended. This is what the middle ground between living only for this world and living only for the world to come looks like. With their eternal future secure, Christians leave the big things of life to God. And this gives them freedom to properly enjoy the blessings God gives them in this present world.

How to Live in the Moment

To cultivate such a reliance on God that reflects itself through living in the moment, there are some practical suggestions to keep in mind.

First, it can be a good practice for Christians to take some time in their lives to simply do nothing.¹¹⁷ What is meant here by “doing nothing” is not literally doing nothing, but rather “an intentional and structured effort to be unproductive.”¹¹⁸ This can include sitting outside and observing God’s creation or catching up on some sleep.¹¹⁹ It could also include reading a book for fun, playing an instrument, or

116. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 154.

117. John Koessler, *Practicing the Present* (Moody, 2019), 195.

118. Koessler, *Practicing the Present*, 200.

119. While these things are considered to be “nothing,” they really are something.

listening to music. While this can be difficult in today's fast-paced world, it is important. In the Old Testament, it is evident that God wanted his people to rest. This is why he created the Sabbath. God wanted his people to be able to take a break from work and trust that even with one less day on the job, he would provide for them.¹²⁰ He also wanted to foreshadow the true rest that his children would have in Christ (Heb 4). The Sabbath gave the people of Israel the opportunity to not only reflect on God's word and grow spiritually, but also have some free time to enjoy life leisurely.

Another way Christians can practice being in the moment is through solitude and silence.¹²¹ To accomplish this in today's world, it is necessary to remove oneself from the distractions of technology and social media.¹²² Without these distractions, Christians can spend some time to take in God's world, reflect on God's promises, and just think. While this can be rare and difficult, it is very valuable.

Second, setting time aside to do nothing and enjoy leisure naturally flows into the activity of play. In society, play is often associated with children and is not seen as something adults can or should do due to their responsibilities and lack of time. Gushiken argues that play should be something Christians of all ages incorporate into their daily lives. He says that play can even be a means of worshipping God.¹²³ Gushiken defines play as "the God-given ability and permission to fully enjoy moments in life as God intended, with freedom and pleasure."¹²⁴ Such play showed up as Jesus enjoyed the wedding he was at (John 2). Furthermore, the OT festivals God instituted also provided time for the people of Israel to enjoy a break from everyday life with one another and experience moments of leisure or play.¹²⁵

120. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 67.

121. Koessler, *Practicing the Present*, 196.

122. Koessler, *Practicing the Present*, 201.

123. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 27.

124. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 20.

125. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 20–24.

Gushiken explains how play is like a mini-Sabbath.¹²⁶ Christians know that Christ has won the ultimate Sabbath rest for his children.¹²⁷ With a child-like trust in God, Christians hand over their concerns to God. They see how rest and leisure are blessings God wants to give his children. This gives them the freedom and permission to enjoy the blessings God gives them in their lives without feeling guilty or second-guessing themselves. They can listen to what Solomon says: “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do” (Eccl 9:7).

Christians can also develop an attitude that is very intentional about enjoying the blessings that God gives on earth. Gratefulness for God’s blessings is a distinctly Christian attitude that leads to true happiness. Rather than stuffing food down their throat or eating a meal in front of the TV, Christians can be intentional about enjoying their food and realize how much of a blessing this is. Rather than taking for granted their spouse, children, or friends, Christians can plan events with loved ones to specifically enjoy God’s blessing of companionship. Rather than spending all day indoors working or watching TV, Christians can go outside to take in the wonders of God’s creation. Rather than complaining about what they do not have, Christians can pause and contemplate what a blessing it truly is to be able to see, to hear, and to walk and easily do things in life that others take for granted. Christians can learn to look at their lives and see the positives instead of the negatives. They can learn to view suffering differently as a time to intentionally read more of the Bible and grow closer to God. With a childlike trust in God, Christians can learn to have an excitement for the “boring” and “ordinary” things of life because they will see these things as gifts of God who “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim 6:17).

Christians can also live in the moment by seeing their vocations and opportunities for evangelism as glorious moments. Even if they are found in the simplest of circumstances, they will see this as an opportunity to serve God. They will take advantage of the opportunities to share their faith with others.

126. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 72.

127. Gushiken, *A Theology of Play*, 68.

Seeing their place in God's story and the opportunity they have to help others find their place in God's story will help Christians find joy in taking advantage of these truly meaningful moments.

The Example of Job

Perhaps Job can serve as a good example for how God's children can find the middle ground between living only for pleasure and living only for pain. Job was a man incredibly blessed with earthly possessions and described as "the greatest man among all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). Yet it also seems as if Job lived his life with dread about the future.¹²⁸ He is seen regularly making sacrifices for his children because he lives in fear that they might sin and curse God in their hearts (Job 1:5). After he is struck down with extreme suffering, he says in his lament: "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me" (Job 3:25). Rather than trusting God and fully taking in the blessings God had given him, it seems as if part of him was constantly preoccupied with the potential of suffering.

This is an attitude that many Christians might struggle with. They know that this world is not all there is. When God does bless them with earthly possessions, maybe they think that these blessings are too good to be true and cannot last. Maybe they have a feeling that something bad is going to happen. For these people, the book of Job can be incredibly instructive.

After Job had suffered for a while, God came to him and reminded him that his knowledge did not compare to God's knowledge. God describes his role in creating the earth, his work in preserving his creation, and his control over the strongest beasts of the earth (Job 38–41). As a sinful human, Job knew nothing in comparison with God. Therefore, he had no right to question God. As Job's friend Zophar explained: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above...they are deeper than the depths below" (Job 11:7–8). While Zophar said a lot of bad things, this was correct. Job did not possess the wisdom God did.

128. Jonathan Bourman and Timothy Bourman, hosts, *The Notable Podcast*, season 5, episode 3, "Pre-Trauma Job," The Notable Podcast, January 28, 2019, 33 min., 01 sec., <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>. Jon and Tim make the connection between Job sacrificing for his children and his anxiety about the future.

Yet by the end of his suffering, Job knew that God's almighty power meant that he could trust God, even if he did not know why he was suffering. He knew that he did not need an explanation for his suffering or his life. What he needed was a better understanding of God.¹²⁹ He says, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:2–3). Job's trust in God can be evidenced by his confidence found in the central (and most important) part of the book when he says: "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth" (Job 19:25). Job knew that there was someone connected to God who would set everything in his life right. He could not understand how, but he trusted in God.

The same is true for Christians today. They may not know why bad things happen to them, but they know that God is all-powerful. They know that his wisdom is greater than theirs (Isa 55:9) and that he will work everything out for their good (Rom 8:28). Tim Bourman provides a good Christian response to the unknown questions Christians have about their life and the future:

Only God knows. I will not venture a guess to know his mind. I do know this: I know that God's wisdom reaches the heavens. I know that his purposes are as wide as the ocean. I know also that he knows suffering through Jesus. I know that he knows victory over suffering, sin, and death. And most of all, I know that the love of God in Christ Jesus is high and wide and deep and long, and nothing can separate us from it!¹³⁰

In the Bible, New Testament Christians have seen Jesus live, die, and rise. In this sense, they have more specific promises of God from Scripture than Job did. Yet the faith they have is the same faith Job had, the faith that would not let go of the restoration that would come through his redeemer—his *goel*. This faith frees Christians up to enjoy the blessings of God in life. This faith—this childlike trust in God that leaves the big things in life to God—is the power that frees God's children to live a little again after going through suffering, trauma, or victimization.¹³¹ They trust God to structure their lives as he knows

129. Jonathan Bourman and Timothy Bourman, hosts, *The Notable Podcast*, season 5, episode 16, "Closure," The Notable Podcast, July 24, 2019, 44 min., 42 sec., <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.

130. Timothy Bourman, *Deep As The Sea* (Northwestern, 2021), 50.

131. Bourman and Bourman, "Closure."

best because he is in control and will work everything out for their good. With this mindset, Christians can find the balance between living only for this world and living only for the world to come. They can enjoy the blessings God gives them on earth without worrying about the future.

The Bible does not specify how long Job suffered, nor does it indicate the mindset with which he lived his life after God restored everything. While Job may have been tempted to return to living with a pessimism about the future because he had seen how quickly everything could be taken away from him, the perspective God gave him through his suffering allowed him to find the middle road between living only for pleasure and living only for pain. As he said, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). God used Job’s suffering to teach him more about himself and strengthen within him a childlike faith that depended totally on God. Rather than worrying if he had enough pleasure or pain in his life, he was free to live in the moment and leave the big things of his life to God to figure out.

Living with a childlike faith makes life a win-win situation in every respect. A childlike faith helps Christians see the connection between the good things in this life and the necessity of suffering through the crosses God sends. God works out suffering for the Christian’s eternal good. And blessings on earth are good when placed in their proper perspective. The eternal future of Christians is secure, and because of this, their lives take on new meaning. They can freely live life with ease and without worry.

Cautions

When defining the narrow middle road between living only for pleasure and living only for pain, it is important to be aware of a couple of pitfalls. First, Christians should not use the passages that talk about enjoying God’s blessings as an excuse to live a hedonistic lifestyle. Christians do not want to replace *hevel* in life with more *hevel*.¹³² If, at their core, they are still obsessed with enjoying the things of this

132. Schwab, “Ecclesiastes and Counsel Under the Sun,” 14. *Hevel* (הֶבֶל) is the Hebrew word often translated as “meaningless” in Ecclesiastes. Literally, it refers to a concept that can be visualized by breath on a cold winter’s day. One moment the breath is visible, the next it is gone. Life without God is *hevel*.

world but say that they are just enjoying them how God wants them to, this is not a correct understanding of what God says in his word. One cannot be a full-on hedonist and call oneself a Christian.¹³³

It is easy to say that one's focus is properly on eternity with God and that one enjoys the things of this world properly, but it is another thing to authentically have this attitude in one's heart. For this reason, it is important for Christians to continually examine themselves and "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). Just as Christians do not want to ignore the passages that talk about enjoying God's blessings, so also they do not want to use these passages as an excuse for hedonism. Furthermore, Christians do not want to diminish the importance of suffering. It is true that the misconceptions of suffering examined above are unbiblical. While it is good to push back against living only for pain and getting out of this meaningless world as soon as possible, Christians do not want to think that suffering should be avoided or that it really is not that important. The theology of the cross is essential to the life of the Christian. Christians must remember that just "as there was no crown for Christ without the cross, so there is no crown for the believer without the sign of the cross."¹³⁴ Through the crosses in their lives, God brings Christians back to the cross of Jesus to be reminded of their only way to salvation. He also uses these crosses to strengthen his children on their journey to heaven. The cross is essential, but Christians do not impose crosses on themselves. Christians should not live to suffer, but that does not mean suffering is not important. Once again, a childlike faith finds the balance. Christians entrust everything to God and are confident that whatever crosses he sends into their lives will result in spiritual blessings for them.

133. John Piper, "What Is Christian Hedonism?" *Desiring God*, August 1, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-christian-hedonism>. John Piper has written about "Christian Hedonism." However, his definition of the term is different from how I am understanding it here. I define "Christian Hedonism" as being a Christian and a hedonist at the same time, which really is an oxymoron. It is impossible to be a Christian and a hedonist because Christians do not live only for the things of this world. They enjoy God's blessings, but not as the ends of life. Christians can struggle against hedonistic temptations, but if they say they are a full-on hedonist, are they truly a Christian?

134. Deutschlander, "Don't Be Afraid! Cheer Up! It's the Cross! Part I," 2.

CONCLUSION

Imagine that one night God comes to you in a dream and tells you, “You have two options. This very night I can take you to be with me forever. Or I can give you an amazing life on this earth for the next sixty years and then I will take you to be with me forever after you have had a good life on earth.” How would you respond? Is there a right way to respond?

While there might not be one “right” way to respond to this hypothetical scenario, there are several biblical principles that are important to keep in mind. A Christian will not want to choose to stay on earth only for the purpose of enjoying earthly pleasures. This is the attitude of hedonism, and, as has been shown, this attitude is unchristian. Similarly, a Christian will not want to choose to be with God immediately only because he or she thinks this earth is entirely meaningless and they just want to get out of it as soon as they can. This view ignores the meaning God gives to life now through his metanarrative and the meaningful things to do in this present world, such as serving others in vocation and evangelism.

On the other hand, there are several good reasons a Christian may have for responding a certain way. If a Christian chooses to stay on earth because they see this world as being deeply meaningful in Christ and because they want to use the time of grace God has given them to serve others and evangelize (and even to properly enjoy God’s blessings), this would not be a wrong motivation for choosing to stay. And if a Christian chooses to be with God not because they want to escape the earth, but because they simply want to be with their loving God in person forever, this would not be a wrong motivation either.

This is similar to the attitude the Apostle Paul expressed in Phil 1:22–26:

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Paul was focused on his eternal goal. He knew that eternity with God would be awesome. And he wanted to get there as soon as he could. However, he knew that there was still important work to be done here in this world and that he could be a blessing to others through his service and spreading of the gospel. Paul was also aware that remaining on earth would mean more suffering for him. But instead of expressing an escapist or pessimistic attitude about his situation, his response was: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Paul did not say, “To me, to live is nothing, and to die is gain.” He said, “To live is Christ.” Christ was the essence of and motivation for his life. Yes, being a follower of Christ would mean taking up his cross, and that he did. Despite suffering, Paul still saw meaning in this world and knew that whether his time to be with God came sooner or later, everything would turn out as a win-win.

In the end, just as for Paul, choosing whether to keep on living or to be with God will never be a choice a Christian has to make. Their heavenly Father chooses how the lives of his children play out. And this is a good thing. Therefore, with a childlike faith, Christians gladly leave everything in life to God, not only pleasure and suffering, but also and especially when their time of grace comes to an end.

It is true that hard times will come in life. Solomon points this out: “Let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many” (Eccl 11:8). Yet this does not mean Christians should live with a perpetual pessimism or try to get out of this world of suffering as soon as possible. A childlike faith removes worry and helps Christians keep everything in perspective. Solomon says, “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future” (Eccl 7:14). God is in control of the lives of his children. He knows what is best for them, even when they themselves do not. Christians who have a childlike faith trust God to take care of them for eternity. This gives believers freedom to live their lives. They can live in the present, be happy, enjoy the world God has given them, and see opportunities to serve others. If suffering comes, Christians will trust that God will work it out for good. If God blesses them with earthly pleasures, Christians will gratefully receive them and enjoy them properly. Christians will seek first God’s kingdom and thankfully serve God and their neighbor in love (Matt 6:33; Eccl 12:13).

Such a childlike faith truly is difficult to have. It is part of the Christian's life of sanctification, and on this side of heaven, such a faith is never perfect until the Christian's faith is turned to sight. Until that day, God's word and sacraments are of utmost importance. "The gospel in Word and sacraments is not only the bridge between the Christian's cross on one side and the crown of glory on the other; it is as well the wagon that must carry us over from the one to the other."¹³⁵ Only in God's gospel can Christians find the middle ground between living only for pleasure and living only for pain.

In the end, it can be good for Christians to remember the axiom that encourages them "to be in the world, but not of it." This phrase is based on what Jesus says in John 17:15–17: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." Christians live in the world but realize that they are true citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20). Therefore, they do not live as people in the world do, only focused on earthly pleasures. Instead, they have an eternal perspective. They know the value of God's kingdom, and, like the merchant who found a pearl of great worth and sold everything to buy this pearl (Matt 13:45–46), the Christian is ready to give up everything on earth for the sake of the gospel.¹³⁶

Yet for as long as they remain in the world, they know that their lives have meaning in Jesus. They do not fear suffering or grow suspicious of earthly pleasures with which God blesses them. With a childlike faith that takes to heart their heavenly Father's promises, Christians will trust God to take care of everything. Only then will they find the middle ground between living only for pleasure and living only for pain, between living only for this world and living only for the world to come.

135. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 56.

136. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arndt, William F. *Luke*. Concordia Classic Commentary. Concordia, 1986.
- Bollhagen, James. *Ecclesiastes*. Concordia Commentary. Concordia, 2011.
- Bourman, Timothy. *Deep As The Sea*. Northwestern Publishing House, 2021.
- Bourman, Jonathan, and Timothy Bourman, hosts. *The Notable Podcast*. Season 5, Episode 3, “Pre-Trauma Job.” The Notable Podcast. January 28, 2019. Podcast, 33 min., 01 sec. <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.
- The Notable Podcast*. Season 5, Episode 16, “Closure.” The Notable Podcast. July 24, 2019. Podcast, 44 min., 42 sec. <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.
- The Notable Podcast*. Season 7, Episode 2, “East of Eden.” The Notable Podcast. October 14, 2021. Podcast, 1 hr., 06 min., 30 sec. <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.
- The Notable Podcast*. Season 7, Episode 4, “Carpe Diem.” The Notable Podcast. November 4, 2021. Podcast, 1 hr., 03 min., 19 sec. <https://thenotablepodcast.com/>.
- Burge, Ryan. “Religion Has Become a Luxury Good.” *Graphs About Religion*, June 26, 2023. <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/religion-has-become-a-luxury-good>.
- Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021.
- Deutschlander, Daniel M. *Don’t Be Afraid! Cheer Up! It’s the Cross!* Paper presented at North Atlantic District Convention and Arizona–California District Convention. 2010. <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/1165>.
- The Narrow Lutheran Middle*. Northwestern Publishing House, 2011.
- The Theology of the Cross*. Northwestern Publishing House, 2008.
- Your Kingdom Come*. Northwestern Publishing House, 2021.
- Emlet, Michael R. “Futility, Meaning, and Life under the Sun: Ecclesiastes for Everyday Life.” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 37, no. 1 (2023): 6–21. ATLAiREM230429000634.
- Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*. Trans. Russel M. Geer. Library of Liberal Arts, 1964.
- Eswine, Zach. *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*. The Gospel According to the Old Testament. P & R, 2014.
- Forde, Gerhard. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. Eerdmans, 1997.

- Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*. Eerdmans, 2010.
- Gushiken, Kevin. *A Theology of Play*. Kregel Academic, 2024.
- Jones, Joshua H. "The Relationship between Tentatio/Anfechtung, the Vita Passiva, and the Missio Dei in Luther's Theology of the Cross." *Lutheran Mission Matters* 32, no. 2 (2024): 132–37. ATLAiACO250404000387.
- Kleinman, Paul. *Philosophy 101*. Adams Media, 2013.
- Koessler, John. *Practicing the Present*. Moody, 2019.
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress, 2000.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Great Divorce*. Macmillan, 1946.
- The Screwtape Letters*. Macmillan, 1959.
- The Weight of Glory*. Macmillan, 1949.
- Luther, Martin. *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Edited by Tryntje Helfferich. Hacker, 2013.
- "Theses for The Heidelberg Disputation." In *Luther's Works: Disputations I*. Ed. Paul R. Hinlicky and Eric G. Phillips. Trans. Eric G. Phillips. Vol. 72. *Luther's Works*. Concordia, 2025.
- McGurran, Brianna. "What Is Lifestyle Creep?" *Experian*, July 9, 2024. <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/what-is-lifestyle-creep/>.
- Meek, Russell. "Fear God and Enjoy His Gifts: Qohelet's Edenic Vision of Life." *Criswell Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (2016): 23–34. ATLAiBCB170123001464.
- Piper, John. "What Is Christian Hedonism?" *Desiring God*. August 1, 2015. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-christian-hedonism>.
- Raymond, Erik. *Chasing Contentment*. Crossway, 2017.
- Schaller, John. *Biblical Christology*. Northwestern Publishing House, 1981.
- Schwab, George M. "Ecclesiastes and Counsel Under the Sun." *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15, no. 2 (1997): 7–16. ATLA0001021258.
- Spurgeon, Charles H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*. Vol. 16. London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1870.
- Thompson, Luke G. *Your Life Has Meaning*. Northwestern, 2019.
- Waldinger, Robert, and Marc Schulz. *The Good Life*. Simon & Schuster, 2023.
- Wittmer, Michael. *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?* Zondervan, 2015.

APPENDIX: HYMNS

Hymns are a great way to make scriptural truths vivid and memorable. However, the poetry of hymns can often be very dense and cause people to miss the main point that the hymn is trying to make. There are many hymns which warn about the allure of wealth and the things of this world, and which also focus Christians on the eternal goal of being with God forever. While there are many great hymns that express the middle ground of trusting God with a childlike faith and leaving everything in his hands, there are some that, in their attempt to warn Christians about one ditch, might unintentionally cause some Christians to have a mindset that lands in or tends toward the opposite ditch.

Here are two examples of hymns that adequately warn Christians about the allure of the things of this world, and which encourage them to put Christ first and follow him:

CW 699: Take the World, but Give Me Jesus¹³⁷

1. Take the world, but give me Jesus, all its joys are but a name; but his love abides forever, through eternal years the same.
2. Take the world, but give me Jesus, sweetest comfort of my soul; with the Savior watching o'er me, I can sing, though thunders roll.
3. Take the world, but give me Jesus; in his cross my trust shall be till with clearer, brighter vision face to face my Lord I see.

Refrain: Oh, the height and depth of mercy! Oh, the length and breadth of love! Oh, the fullness of redemption, pledge of endless life above!

137. All hymns taken from *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, Northwestern Publishing House, 2021.

CW 702: Come, Follow Me, the Savior Spake

1. “Come, follow me,” the Savior spake, “all in my way abiding; deny yourselves, the world forsake, obey my call and guiding. O bear the cross, whate’er betide, take my example for your guide.
2. “I am the light, I light the way, a godly life displaying; I bid you walk as in the day, I keep your feet from straying. I am the way, and well I show how you must sojourn here below.
3. “I teach you how to shun and flee what harms your soul’s salvation, your heart from ev’ry guile to free, from sin and its temptation. I am the refuge of the soul and lead you to your heav’nly goal.”
4. Then let us follow Christ our Lord and take the cross appointed and, firmly clinging to his Word, in suff’ring be undaunted. For those who bear the battle’s strain the crown of heav’nly life obtain.

“Take the World, but Give Me Jesus” addresses the more common ditch of living only for this world or living only for pleasure. It also points Christians to Jesus and the invaluable importance he has in comparison with the temporary things of this world. The things of this world pass away, but eternity with God lasts forever. Even though it can be challenging to let go of the things they know and love in the world, with Jesus and his cross before them, Christians can do just that.

“Come, Follow Me, the Savior Spake” describes the theology of the cross. Christians must forsake the “gain” the world offers to follow Jesus, deny themselves, and take up their cross (stanza one). Jesus guides his children (stanza two), and he teaches them how to shun and flee what is harmful to their salvation (stanza three). The cross is not easy, and taking it up is a daily battle, but it is worth it because it results in an eternity of true glory and gain (stanza four). This hymn reminds Christians of these truths and helps them focus on eternal life with God, a life that is found through bearing the cross.

While many hymns accurately describe the danger of the things of this world, there are a few that could be misinterpreted by Christians and cause them to think that the world is all bad and that it is wrong if they enjoy any earthly pleasure. The following are two examples:

CW 853: I'm But a Stranger Here

1. I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home; earth is a desert drear, heaven is my home;
danger and sorrow stand round me on every hand; heaven is my fatherland, heaven is my home.
2. What though the tempest rage, heaven is my home; short is my pilgrimage, heaven is my home;
and time's wild, wintry blast soon shall be overpast; I shall reach home at last, heaven is my home.
3. Therefore I murmur not, heaven is my home; whate'er my earthly lot, heaven is my home;
and I shall surely stand there at my Lord's right hand; heaven is my fatherland, heaven is my home.

CW 694: Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken

1. Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow you; destitute, despised, forsaken, you on earth once suffered too. Perish every fond ambition, all I've ever hoped or known; yet how rich is my condition, God and heaven are still my own!
2. Let the world despise and leave me; they have left my Savior, too. Human hearts and looks deceive me; you are not, like them, untrue. And, since you have smiled upon me, God of wisdom, love, and might, foes may hate and friends may shun me; show your face, and all is bright.
3. Go, then, earthly fame and treasure! Come, disaster, scorn, and pain! In your service pain is pleasure, with your favor loss is gain. I have called you Abba, Father; you my all in all shall be. Storms may howl, and clouds may gather, all must work for good to me.
4. Haste, my soul, from grace to glory, armed by faith and winged by prayer; all but heaven is transitory, God's own hand shall guide you there. Soon shall end this earthly story, swift shall pass the pilgrim days, hope soon change to heavenly glory, faith to sight and prayer to praise.

In "I'm But a Stranger Here," the author's intent is to direct the gaze of Christians heavenward and remind them how this world pales in comparison with their eternal home. However, phrases such as "earth is a desert drear" and "danger and sorrow stand round me on every hand" (stanza one) could be interpreted by some Christians as meaning that there really is nothing good about earth and that they should want to escape it as fast as possible, just as they would want to escape a dry desert. It is not that this is a bad hymn. It is just that its language could cause some people to miss its intent and come away with some harsh views about the earth we live in.

Stanzas one, two, and four of “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken” vividly describe the doctrine of the theology of the cross. The intent of the author is to get Christians to think about the necessity of suffering and how, with God at our side, we have nothing to fear in following the path Jesus himself trod. However, phrases in stanza three such as “go, then earthly fame and treasure!”, “come, disaster, scorn, and pain!”, “in your service pain is pleasure,” and “with your favor loss is gain” could give the impression to some Christians that they must seek out the cross and do what they can to impose it on themselves, or at least do what they can to shun all pleasure in this world. Because of this, some Christians could find themselves tending toward the ditch of living only for pain and wanting to escape this world for the world to come as soon as possible. Once again, this is not a bad hymn, but it is important for Christians understand the intent of the author and to be careful in how they use this hymn in their conversations about pleasure and pain.

In the end, “I’m But a Stranger Here” is a great hymn to sing at a Christian funeral to comfort those left behind with the reminder that what the deceased has gained by being with God is better by far. And while “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken” has value in being sung to remind Christians of the proper relationship between this world and the world to come, it seems like there is the potential for some Christians to miss the intent and come away with some ideas that are not quite correct.

Finally, here are two hymns that excellently and vividly describe the middle ground of trusting God with a childlike faith:

CW 799: I Leave All Things to God’s Direction

1. I leave all things to God’s direction; he loves me both in joy and woe. His will is good, sure his affection; his tender love is true, I know. My fortress and my rock is he: what pleases God, that pleases me.
2. God knows what must be done to save me; his love for me will never cease. Upon his hands he did engrave me with purest gold of loving grace. His will supreme must ever be: what pleases God, that pleases me.
3. God gives me help in all temptation, his loving goal my soul to save. Calm in the face of life’s frustration, all earthly trouble I will brave. His will be done eternally: what pleases God, that pleases me.

4. My God has all things in his keeping; he is my ever faithful friend. He gives me laughter after weeping, and all his ways in blessings end. His love endures eternally: what pleases God, that pleases me.

CW 807: All Depends on Our Possessing

1. All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing, though all earthly wealth depart. They who trust with faith unshaken in their God are not forsaken and will keep a dauntless heart.
2. He who to this day has fed me and to many joys has led me is and ever shall be mine. He who ever gently schools me, he who daily guides and rules me, will remain my help divine.
3. Many spend their lives in fretting over trifles and in getting things that have no solid ground. I shall strive to win a treasure that will bring me lasting pleasure and that now is seldom found.
4. When with sorrow I am stricken, hope anew my heart will quicken; all my longing shall be stilled. To his loving kindness tender soul and body I surrender, for on God alone I build.
5. Well he knows what best to grant me; all the longing hopes that haunt me, joy and sorrow have their day. I shall doubt his wisdom never; as God wills, so be it ever; I commit to him my way.
6. If my days on earth he lengthen, he my weary soul will strengthen; all my trust in him I placed. Earthly wealth is not abiding, like a stream away is gliding; safe I anchor in his grace.

Christians who trust God with a childlike faith “leave all things to God’s direction.” They know that “both in joy and woe” God loves them and that his will is good (stanza one). God has shown his love for them by saving Christians through the work of Jesus, and he will bring their eternal salvation to completion one day (stanza two). God is with Christians and helps them in temptation (stanza three). It is important for Christians to remember that God works all things out for their eternal good, and the phrase “He gives me laughter after weeping, and all his ways in blessings end” expresses this truth beautifully (stanza four). This truly is a wonderful hymn that reminds Christians to see themselves as God’s children and continually say, “What pleases God, that pleases me!” Doing so helps them remember the middle ground between living only for pleasure and living only for pain.

“All Depends on Our Possessing” is a great hymn that reminds Christians that God’s grace and blessing are what truly matter in life (stanza one). A (childlike) faith in God will help Christians not get bogged down by the difficult things of this sinful world (stanza one). God preserves Christians (stanza two), he has given them a treasure greater than anything on earth (stanza three), and he helps them in sorrow (stanza four). Christians always want to remember that God knows what is best for them and that he will work everything for their good (stanza five). Christians do not worry about when their time of grace should end; they simply trust God to guide their lives as he knows best, strengthen them along the way, and bring them to be with him when the time is right (stanza six). This is a great hymn that expresses the middle ground of a childlike faith between living only for this world and living only for the world to come.

In the end, all these hymns deserve to be in the hymnal. This appendix is not to say that some are bad and should not be sung. It is just to illustrate the fact that some Christians can misinterpret the intent of hymns and speak in ways that do not land in the middle ground between pleasure and pain, between a proper view of this world and a proper view of the world to come. Always remembering to have a childlike trust in God will help the Christian find the middle ground. This thought is important to keep in mind when singing all these wonderful hymns.¹³⁸

138. *Grammarly* was used in editing and correcting grammar and spelling mistakes in this paper.

Pleasure or Pain? Finding the Middle Ground between Living only for this World and Living only for the World to Come. © 2026 by Matthew Rugen is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>