



Chapter 1

#liveyourbestlife

Thou shalt always act in accord with your chief
end—to glorify and enjoy yourself forever.

*Glory to Man in the Highest! For
Man is the master of things.*

—A. C. SWINBURNE, HUMANIST

*If a man would make his world large, he
must be always making himself small.*

—G. K. CHESTERTON, THEIST

Preview Chapter

What could you do to become as dumb and heartless as a rock? How could you become as plastic and phony as a consumer product? How might you lose your identity and evolve into your significant other's soulless clone? It's simple. Worship your significant other, worship consumer products, or worship a rock.

The Anomaly and Einstein's Law

Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson understood this phenomenon well when he wrote, "A man will worship something—have no doubts about that. . . . Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming."¹ Three millennia before Emerson made that connection, the ancient Jewish psalmist had this to say about human-manufactured gods:

They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them. (Psalm 115:5–8)

It's true. For better or worse, we become like whatever we worship. Our objects of veneration shape our souls' formation or deformation.

When I wrote a book about this truth several years ago, an anomaly kept popping up in my research.² The thesis holds true if we talk about ancient Near Eastern idols. Those who bowed down to chiseled stone deities did have a way of becoming thick and dull like rocks. Emerson's insight that we become what we worship holds true with many gods, except one.

This peculiar idol breaks the rules and defies the data. When you bow before it, you don't become like it at all. You become less and less like it until you are horribly not like it. Unlike all the other gods who make you more like them as you bow, the more you worship your self, the less you become your self. You become a shadow, a specter, an unself. The longer and deeper you stare into the mirror, looking for answers, the more it will feel like looking at Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. This is the strange paradox of self-worship.

Why? It's simple. You were not designed to be the center point of your own psyche. You are not God. Self-deification is a bust. We were never meant to trust in, be defined by, be justified through, be satisfied in, and be captivated by ourselves. We were made to revere Someone infinitely more interesting than ourselves. To speak another modern heresy, it is in a state of self-forgetful reverence that we become most truly and freely ourselves.

This forms the first plank in our case against today's fastest growing religion. The more self-absorbed we are, the less awe we experience; the less awe we experience, the less fully ourselves we become. As Albert

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Einstein put it, "A person first starts to live when he can live outside himself."³ It is awe that is "the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."⁴ The great physicist goes on to locate awe "at the center of true religiousness."⁵

Let us call this Einstein's law: The more you revere something

more awesome than yourself, the more alive you become. The more you revere yourself as the most awesome being in existence, the more awful your life becomes.

We are hardwired to function best in a state of awe. This explains why over 35,000 people a year make the inconvenient trek to Mount Everest, 3.5 million to Yosemite, 4.5 million to the Grand Canyon, and 30 million to Niagara Falls.⁶ On a gut level, we already know and live Einstein's law. We *want* to be awestruck.

To prove it, let's perform a quick thought experiment. Picture two scenarios. In the first, you lay sprawled on a car hood in the mountains of Tromsø, Norway. Tromsø offers prime viewing of the neon rivers of the aurora borealis. Chartreuse and teal ooze together like watercolor streaks down a black canvas. It is all too awesome (in the original sense of the word of inspiring awe or reverence) to worry about yourself. There you lay, a self-forgetful dust speck with a stellar seat to a celestial light and magic show.

The second scenario also finds you on your back, only this time you are sealed inside your own vintage 1960s sensory deprivation tank. (These were soundproof, lightproof pods filled with salt water, invented in the 1950s and popularized in the 1970s as a way to shut down your senses to allegedly achieve a higher state of consciousness.) As you float in the brine and the blackness, your own consciousness becomes your entire universe. You can analyze yourself endlessly to discover your "true self." My question is this: Where would you feel most truly human, most freely yourself? Take your pick: Tromsø or the tank.

Science Catching Up to Scripture

Two recent scientific findings suggest where I would find you. First is a solid body of research from the social sciences that shows a steep spike in unhappiness over precisely the same time

frame that seeking our own happiness first became a celebrated obsession across America. During the 1960s it became trendy and mainstream to interpret the constitutionally protected “pursuit of happiness” in a highly individualistic, subjective, psychological light, as the right, even the entitlement, to make my three best friends—me, myself, and I—happy.

We might think that this trending zeal for happier selves ushered us into a new golden age of freedom and bliss. But the opposite happened. In *The American Paradox*, psychologist David Myers carefully documents how from 1960 to the turn of the twenty-first century, America doubled the divorce rate, tripled the teen suicide rate, quadrupled the violent crime rate, quintupled the prison population, sextupled out-of-wedlock births, and septupled the rate of cohabitation without marriage (which is a significant predictor of eventual divorce).⁷ In his work on the neuroscience of happiness, Kevin Corcoran sums up the research bluntly: “It seems the more we desire happiness, pursue it, and consume products we hope will help us to achieve it, the *less* happy and *more* depressed we become.”⁸

Social science has gradually caught up with something theologians have been talking about for millennia, “the paradox of hedonism.” The more we seek happiness, the more miserable we tend to become. Like gulping saltwater, what seems like a perfectly sane way to quench our thirst for happiness leaves us drinking ourselves into fatal dehydration. In Jesus’s words, “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it” (Luke 17:33).

This leads to a second scientific finding that helps explain the catastrophic rise of misery in our age of self-fulfillment. After exposing his subjects to several “elicitors of awe,” University of California, Irvine scientist Paul Piff reported, “We found the same sorts of effects—people felt smaller, less self-important, and

behaved in a more prosocial fashion.”⁹ Piff coined the term “small self” to describe this phenomenon. Awestruck people were more generous, attuned to the needs of others, and caring toward the natural world.

Dr. Shiota of Arizona State University has found that awe also improves our cognition.¹⁰ It makes us less susceptible to bad arguments and more responsive to good ones.¹¹ There is also a mountain of research from positive psychologists that awe leads to a substantial decline in depression. Want a happier, fuller life? The science is clear: go be awestruck by something bigger than yourself.

Again, the science is gradually catching up with truth that theologians have been trying to tell us for millennia. We are designed to run on awe. Over a hundred times, the Old Testament commands us to express *yirah*—that is, reverence. That reminds me of an unforgettable image from the pen of Robert Jastrow, one of NASA’s first and most decorated astronomers. In the last line of his book on twentieth-century breakthroughs in big bang cosmology, Jastrow said that the modern scientist “has scaled the mountain of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”¹²

It was once conventional wisdom that the universe has existed forever in a static state. With a little help from Einstein’s general theory of relativity, astronomers came to realize that our universe is not eternal after all. It burst into being at a definitive point, and it did so under astonishingly fine-tuned conditions. Jastrow was saying that it took a while, but the science finally caught up with the first line of the Bible—“In the beginning . . .”

What Jastrow described is something like what we see happening to our twenty-first-century understanding of awe. When Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel said, “The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe,” he did not learn that the way Dr. Shiota

did.¹³ He learned it from the Bible. The church of the first century didn't do longitudinal studies on the "small self." They lived it. Two millennia before Dr. Piff documented "the prosocial effects of awe,"¹⁴ the book of Acts recorded that "awe came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). In the very next passage, we read that "all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (vv. 44–45).¹⁵ How's that for "prosocial effects"?

Theology and science agree—the more awe we experience, the more satisfyingly human we become. We don't just *want* to be awestruck, we *need* to be awestruck. We are made to marvel. It's in our nature. This, again, is why today's fastest growing world religion leaves many people high and dry. Self-worship leaves us aweless and empty because we aren't nearly as awesome as we like to think.

The good news is that there is no scarcity of awesomeness all around us: Those music-making wonders of aeronautical technology we call "birds." The pulsating pixels of a baby's heart on an ultrasound. A Fyodor Dostoevsky novel. A Johann Sebastian Bach or John Williams symphony. A Beatles or Sigur Rós album. A Christopher Nolan or Terrence Malick film. A Michelangelo fresco, Rembrandt woodcut, or Van Gogh canvas. The glistening irises in a lover's eyes. A medium-rare rib eye. An eighteen-year single malt. A kiss. Your next breath. A thunderstorm.

There are plentiful "elicitors of awe" in our daily worlds. What are they for you? Come up with your top five. Take a moment.

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Gods in Our Image

Behold your favorite awe-elicitors long enough and you will find something they all share. None of them are complete unto

themselves. None of them are perfect, eternal, or infinite. They have half-lives. They wear off. They lack a certain staying power. Why? Because awe-elicitors exist to signal the reality of something, or rather *Someone*, still more awesome. They are premises, not the conclusion; rivers, not the ocean; sunbeams, not the sun; doorways, not the destination. Consider this book your invitation to follow the ten million signposts of awe in your life to their infinite Source.¹⁶ You become most truly yourself not merely in a state of awe but in a state of awe for the ultimate Source of all that is awesome. And who is that?

It is the God of the Bible. No doubt, that last sentence feels like a record scratch to some of you. A sunset? Oooh! A starlit night? Ahhh! But the God of the Bible pushed by many forms of Christianity? Ughhhh! To many, the Christian God hardly seems a worthy object of awe.

As a man who worships the God of the Bible, how do I respond to those who balk at the very idea of Someone I find so thrilling? For me, this is far from hypothetical. I taught History of Atheism at a state college for nearly a decade, with hundreds of atheistic students, many of whom became dear friends (and some who no longer identify as atheists). I have had thousands of hours of vulnerable conversations with people who brazenly reject Christianity. Some never professed faith, and others claim to have deconverted or had a “breakup with God.”

A surprising conclusion comes from these conversations. Many renditions of the so-called Christian God shunned by many non-Christians are gods who I, as a Christian, gladly shun too. British theologian A. W. Pink made the point a century ago: “How different is the God of the Bible from the God of modern Christendom! . . . The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than awe-inspiring reverence.”¹⁷ Before Pink, Frederick Douglass, the great American abolitionist, recognized “the widest possible

difference” between “the Christianity of this land” (which he thought unworthy of the title) and “the Christianity of Christ.”¹⁸

If you find yourself skeptical or positively squeamish about the God of the Bible, it is possible that you reject a counterfeit deity that properly evokes more antipathy than awe.¹⁹ One dear friend rejects a god who allegedly told his cancer-stricken dad to refuse all medical services and to bank on a guaranteed miracle that never came. Another friend rejected a god who denounced her scientific curiosity as the unpardonable sin. Others rejected a god who cared nothing about bringing wholeness and redemption to broken people, only about cold, letter-of-the-law rule enforcement, poised with thunderbolts at the first sight of a moral blunder. These gods share something in common. They trace their origins to the wishful imaginations of bad theologians. Custom-tailoring gods in our own image is a hallmark of bad theology.

Over two and a half millennia ago, a Greek philosopher called Xenophanes saw the problem. “Men believe that the gods are clothed and shaped and speak like themselves,” Xenophanes observed.

“If oxen and horses and lions could draw and paint they would delineate their gods in their own image. . . . The Thracians [believe] that their gods have blue eyes and red hair.”²⁰ In the eighteenth century, Voltaire put it memorably: “If God made us in his image, we have certainly returned the compliment.”²¹

Xenophanes and Voltaire were on to something. Most forms of theism are self-worship incognito, our individual personalities and prejudices disguised as something transcendent and sacred. The moralistic whistleblower projects his cosmic guilt-tripper into the sky. There is a prosperity-showering deity for the materialist, a lifeless X at the end of a neat logical syllogism for the philosopher, a neo-Nazi god for the white nationalist, a Marxist god for the hard leftist.

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Each of these manufactured gods has been marketed as the Christian God. So when I say my goal is to convince you to become an atheist about the god of self, that includes the gods of other selves. It certainly includes “Christian” gods conjured up by other imperfect people.²² To skeptics, I say bluntly that you have likely rejected some overblown projection of an unholy jerk. If so, then I am right there with you.

While rejecting the deities of his day, Xenophanes carved out an important distinction. He believed that, despite all our anthropomorphic gods, “one God” still exists and “in neither his form or his thought is he like unto mortals.”²³ Centuries before Xenophanes, the Bible put it starkly: “God is not man” (Num. 23:19). Calling the idols of his age “false,” “worthless,” and “a work of delusion,” and after comparing man-made gods to “scarecrows in a cucumber field” (apparently quite a zinger in the ancient Near East), Jeremiah went on to acknowledge, “There is none like you, O LORD” (Jer. 10:5–6, 14–15). God faults the Israelites, saying, “You thought that I was one like yourself” (Ps. 50:21). But “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD” (Isa. 55:8).

So, dear reader, I ask you keep an open mind to the possibility that, for all your proper unbelief, there exists a Being far worthier of awe and enjoyment than anyone you have ever imagined. There is a God to be discovered, not invented; a living Person, not a projection; a Being who defies and exceeds our expectations. Crack open the door to belief, just a sliver. You just may find someone there—Someone awesome, uncreated, and unimaginably good.

Two Hymns

I have sketched a case that given our shortage of awesomeness, putting ourselves at the center of the universe strips us of awe and

renders us deeply unhappy. But God is awesome in all the ways the deepest recesses of our souls long to be awestruck. Here are fourteen ways that God is a far more excellent object of awe than the images we see in the mirror:

1. God never lies or breaks promises. We do.
2. God is not bound by time, but sees it all—past, present, and future—with perfect clarity. He was here long before us, even before time existed, which is one of his ideas. We are stuck in this moment, hazy about much of the past and oblivious to much of the future.
3. God is self-existent, requiring no one to bring him into being or keep him alive. We needed a mother and a father to bring us into existence. We need oxygen, food, water, and (for some of you) caffeine to continue existing.
4. God is sovereign, enthroned over the entire universe; Lord over galaxies, nations, and subatomic particles. We might pretend to be sovereign, but our control over the world is a pipe dream.
5. God is not bound by space; he is present everywhere. We are where we are right now, circumscribable. We could draw ten-foot circles around one another and say truly, “This circle contains you.”
6. God is infinitely satisfying. Our best attempts to be the source of ultimate satisfaction for others will leave us all exhausted, jaded, and disillusioned.
7. God is the supreme Artist who thought up glowing space nebulae, Technicolor sunsets, the flavor of watermelon and coffee beans, the melodies of songbirds, the kaleidoscopic patterns in a human iris, and everything else beautiful in creation. We are created to be creative like him, but for all our most sublime artistic feats, he is the true Master.

8. God can create *ex nihilo* by an act of sheer artistic will-power. We can create only from pre-existing stuff.
9. God is gracious and merciful, bestowing ill-deserved favor on his creatures. We can be petty, grudge-harboring, and spiteful. We need grace to draw our next breaths.
10. God knows all things and his wisdom is boundless. He can never learn, be surprised, or fit fully into the boxes of finite minds. For us, the universe is full of question marks, and the more we know the more we realize we don't know.
11. God is one Being who exists eternally as three equal and inter-loving Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As such, God has always been engaged in interpersonal loving community in his very Being, and he invites you into that love. Our love as humans can be beautiful and authentic but it pales in comparison to the infinite love we are offered in the triune God.
12. God feels perfectly. He is never temperamental, moody, or overcome by wild emotions. Our emotions often vacillate and fall out of sync with reality.
13. God is holy, transcending all sin, evil, and injustice. We slip into sin more times a day than we can count.
14. God is infinitely and altogether awesome. We are not.

Having seen something of the Creator-creature distinction, the difference between God and us, let us close with two hymns. In 1879 British philosopher W. K. Clifford wrote,

The dim and shadowy outline of the superhuman deity fades slowly away from us. . . . We perceive with greater and greater clearness the shape of a yet grander and nobler figure. . . . Our father Man [note well the capital M] looks out upon us with the fire of eternal youth in his eyes, and says, "before Jehovah was, I am."²⁴

The longer and louder we sing the praises of man, the less awe-struck we become. We buckle under the weight of our own infinite expectations on ourselves. If we want to inhale true freedom, then let us join with saints around the globe in the words of a classic hymn composed shortly after Clifford wrote his sacrilegious hymn to human greatness:

Oh Lord, my God
When I, in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed

[I happen to be typing these words on a balcony under the stars as the Mexican sky lights up and thunder rolls. Awe inspiring!]

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art.²⁵

A Heretic's Testimonial

Joni Eareckson Tada is an author, a speaker, and an international advocate for people with disabilities. Her ministry, Joni and Friends (<http://www.joniandfriends.org>), provides programs to special needs families, as well as training to churches worldwide. She is also a heretic against the cult of self-worship. She boldly breaks the #liveyourbestlife commandment. This is her story.

Lately, I've been whispering the question David asked in 1 Chronicles 17:16: "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" *Who am I to enjoy a platform on national radio for forty years? Who am I that I should be so blessed in marriage to Ken for forty years? And how did I ever have the strength to survive fifty-five years as a quadriplegic in a wheelchair?*

The truth is, I don't have the strength. I still wake up every morning needing God desperately. Like David, I often confess, "I am poor and needy" (Ps. 40:17). Perhaps that's how God brought me this far. I can't say, but I do know that "the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chron. 16:9 NIV). God is searching high and low for weak people who love him so that he can pour into them *his* strength. Maybe that's my story, but how I arrived here is not for me to say. I just keep praising my sovereign God with every milestone I pass.

It's the noble cause of Christ to which I've dedicated myself for decades, and I can't think of anything that gives me more joy. Yet as I reach the milestone of fifty-five years of quadriplegia—not to mention two bouts of cancer, severe breathing issues, COVID-19, and chronic pain—I hold tightly to Acts 20:24 (NIV): "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

When a broken neck upended my life all those years ago, I was depressed and devastated. God transformed my heart, changed my attitude, and showed me there are more

important things in life than walking. Aging with quadriplegia may be filled with extra challenges, but it doesn't demoralize me. With God's help, I hold everything lightly. I try not to grasp at my fragile life, nor coddle it or minimize my activities at Joni and Friends just because I'm getting older, growing weaker, and dealing with more pain. Rather, I find great comfort and joy in dying to self and living every day to serve the Lord Jesus and others around the world whose disabilities are far more profound than mine.

What else could be more important than practicing Christianity, with sleeves rolled up, among the needy? When I do become tired, I'm inspired by the life of Jesus, who, even as he was nailed on his cross and in great pain, nevertheless kept serving others (like the thief, his mother, and the soldiers who needed forgiveness). Ephesians 5:1 tells me to imitate him. So I'm heaven bent on honoring my Jesus, serving others, finishing the race, and completing the task of testifying to gospel grace. So here I sit, glad that I have not been healed on the outside, but glad that I have been healed on the inside—healed from my own self-centered wants and wishes.

—Joni

A Heretic's Prayer

God,

*You are true to your promises, self-existent, sovereign,
unbound by space and time, infinitely satisfying, the
source of beauty, full of grace and mercy, all-knowing*

and incomprehensible, all-loving and triune, changelessly perfect, holy, and awesome in every way our souls long to be awestruck. We are none of those things. Lord, help our dull hearts better align with reality. Help us feel more and more awe at your supreme awesomeness. Amen.

A Heretic's Field Manual

Before moving on to the next chapter, do three or four of the following to sharpen your skills at violating the commandment to #liveyourbestlife:

1. Get out in God's creation. Stop to observe and soak in the creative genius manifest around you. Thank him for it.
2. Sing a hymn. Old hymns like "How Great Thou Art," "Fair-est Lord Jesus," "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," and "Be Thou My Vision" break us out of self-centeredness and recalibrate our emotions to be awestruck at the size and splendor of God. Make a playlist and let these old God-centered songs be the soundtrack to your day.
3. Turn off your devices, eliminate distractions, and slowly read through Isaiah 46. As you read, thank God for each aspect of his awesomeness you see revealed in the text.
4. Attend a gathering of people who worship God. Join in the songs, no matter your vocal skill (or lack thereof). Don't sing with a self-centered expectation of receiving a spiritual buzz, but purely to melodically declare truth about God to God in unison with others. As C. S. Lewis said, "The

perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of. Our attention would have been on God.”²⁶

5. Set aside five minutes to pray through the twelve divine attributes in the previous prayer. Don’t pray about yourself and your needs at all for this particular prayer. Instead, simply thank God for being who he is. Ask him to help you be increasingly awestruck by his manifold glories. If helpful, use the following acrostic about the God at the BIBLE’S CENTER to help guide your prayer:

The God at the **BIBLE’S CENTER** is . . . _____

Biblically revealed: God is knowable because he has made himself knowable, communicating who he is by inspiring sixty-six books of the Bible. Read Numbers 23:19, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, and 2 Peter 1:21.

I Am / self-existent: God exists objectively and not as a subjective human projection. He *is*. God is also self-existent, requiring no one and nothing to bring him into existence. Read Exodus 3:14, Psalm 90:2, and Acts 17:24.

Beyond time: God is not bound by time, but creates it, sees it all with equal clarity, and acts within it. He does not progress or change over time, and as a perfect being, he does not need to. Read Psalm 102:25–27, Isaiah 46:9–10, and Revelation 1:8.

Lord of everything: God, as a sovereign being, always does whatever he pleases, however he pleases, whenever he pleases, to whomever or whatever he

pleases for the sake of his glory. Read Daniel 4:34–35, Isaiah 46:8–10, and Ephesians 1:11.

Everywhere: God, as creator of space, is not space itself nor limited by it. As an omnipresent being, God may hide, but there is no hiding from him. Read 2 Chronicles 6:18, Psalm 139:7–10, and Jeremiah 23:23–24.

Satisfying: God is the supreme object of deepest joy possible, the only infinite source of all true, lasting human fulfillment, and the chief purpose for our existence. Read Psalm 63:1–5, Ecclesiastes 1:14, and John 10:10.

Creative: God, as creator of everything from Scripture to sunsets, is the supreme artist and architect. He is the ultimate source of all true beauty and order in the universe. Read Genesis 1:1–31, Job 38–39, and Hebrews 1:1–3, 10–12.

Emotional: God feels genuine grief at his creatures' rebellion, anger at their trivialization of his glory, jealousy at their worship of false gods, and joy at their salvation and obedience. Read Genesis 6:6, Isaiah 1:11–14, and Zephaniah 3:17.

Needy-saving: God, as a gracious and merciful being, saves those who cannot save themselves, forgives sin, and lavishes utterly undeserved favor on his creatures. Read Ezekiel 16, Romans 3:24, and Ephesians 1:3–2:18.

Thinking: God is all-knowing, the source of all truth who can neither learn nor be surprised. As a being of infinite intellect, he is not fully comprehensible to finite

human minds. Read Isaiah 55:8–9, Psalm 139:1–4, and Romans 11:33.

Engaged in love: God is one being who exists as three coequal, coeternal, and interloving persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This triune God is love and profoundly loves his creatures. Read Isaiah 43:10, Luke 3:21–22, and John 17:20–28.

Righteous / holy: God is the source and standard of all goodness. As a holy, holy, holy being, he exists in unique moral splendor, separate from all sin and corruption, which he justly punishes. Read Deuteronomy 32:1–4, Isaiah 6:1–4, and 1 Peter 1:16.