

A  
*Theology*  
of  
*Play*

LEARNING  
TO ENJOY LIFE  
AS GOD INTENDED

KEVIN M. GUSHIKEN



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*A Theology of Play: Learning to Enjoy Life as God Intended*

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To  
Penny,  
*my lifelong playmate*



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## INTRODUCTION

### *Let's Begin to Play*

*We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.*

—George Bernard Shaw

This book is about play. It is my hope that the contents of this book will inspire you to enjoy life more fully, with exuberance and richness. It is my prayer that your life will gradually be marked with regular moments and seasons of play. I would love nothing more than to hear that play has become a natural part of your life without scheduling it—spontaneous play. Imagine that: play just happening in your life.

There has been tremendous research on the science of play. In 2010, Stuart Brown wrote the national best-selling book *Play*. It is an incredible work that unpacks research on how play impacts us intellectually and emotionally. He is also the founder of the National Institute for Play, a nonprofit organization committed to the promotion of play. Jaak Panksepp wrote in *The Archaeology of Mind*, “A rigorous scientific approach to play reveals that all mammals possess a fundamental brain system, PLAY, which accounts for the universal inclination to play. Current research suggests that the PLAY system may be especially important in the epigenetic development and maturation of the neocortex” (Panksepp and Rivin 2012, 386).

Further, research has shown that play is connected to healthy human development. For children, playing unlocks creativity that encourages

self-discovery (Winnicott 1971). It is proven to aid in the healing of children who have experienced abuse, which has spawned play therapy to help restore emotional well-being (Cattanach 1993). Play benefits not only in the immediate but also over the long term. It can enhance a person's health years later (Frost 2010). Studies have shown that the absence of play has led to significant emotional issues later in life. Stuart Brown stated,

Sustained, moderate to severe play deprivation particularly during the first 10 years of life appeared linked to major varied but virtually omnipresent emotional dysregulation; i.e., increased prevalence of depression, a tendency to become mired in rigid inflexible perceptions of options available for adaptation, diminished impulse control, less self regulation, increased addictive predilection, diminished management of aggression, and fragility and shallowness of enduring interpersonal relationships. (Brown 2014)

In essence, play is essential for emotional health, and the absence of play leads to depression, moodiness, and narcissism (Brown 2014).

Play not only impacts the individual but also improves social welfare. Joe Frost, in *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments*, detailed how the "diminution, modification, and/or disappearance of play" in modern culture is negatively impacting social welfare (2009). Play is good for our relationships and societal interactions. It allows us to engage with others in an emotionally healthy manner. We are hardwired to play. Play activates the frontal cortex. In fact, affective neuroscientists have proven that humans are born with seven primary-process emotional systems, one being play (Narvaez 2012). We are created to play, individually and with one another. It has personal and societal benefits.

This raises a primary concern of this book. If scientists affirm the benefits of play, should not also theologians? More specifically, should not Christians who know and worship the creator of all truth, theological and scientific, affirm and embrace play? It is my conviction that God designed humans with the capacity to play. He desires that we engage in play for personal pleasure, community enrichment, and spiritual expression.

Play is a gift given to us by God. That is why I titled this book *A Theology of Play*. This book is meant to provide a theological treatment of play for the purposes of grounding play in a Christian worldview. It is from this perspective that one can embrace play in the mindset and manner intended by God. As will be presented in this book, I believe Christians should lead the charge on play. We should celebrate, enjoy, and honor God through it. As such, if you have not yet received Christ, I encourage you to seriously consider doing so as you read this book. While play is God's gift to humanity, a relationship with Jesus will enable you to experience the fullness of play as designed and desired by God.

This book is divided into ten chapters. Each chapter contains a different focus, ranging from work to forgiveness. Chapter 1, "What is Play?," unpacks the definition of play. It explores the biblical foundations of play, including the key verses supporting the topic. It also introduces an overarching theological framework for play. In sum, the overall rationale for a biblical exploration of play is developed to provide a foundation for the book.

Prior to developing a construct of play, it is necessary to unpack those things that hold us back from play. Chapter 2, "Barriers to Play," discusses some of these obstacles, including seriousness, discontentment, resentment, time commitments, unbalanced theology, personal backgrounds, and division. Specific application to the church is provided. This chapter might require some pausing as you think of your own roadblocks to play, and I encourage you to take time to do so.

The next chapter, "Learning to Love Me: Playing in My Identity," unpacks personal identity and how it is shaped by historic and societal influences. In contrast, Christians are to be framed by God's perspective of them—they are to have a God-identity. The relationship between identity and play is woven throughout the chapter. We will center on two specific applications to identity and play: appearance and personality. Personally, this is one of my favorite chapters.

Chapter 4 is titled "Learning to Be: Playing in the Moment." We are oftentimes bound to the past or focused on the future, which prevents us from being in the moment, a necessity for play. This chapter unravels the primary theological reasons as to why it is challenging to live in the

moment. Practical application as to how to begin “being” in the realm of play is discussed. For me, this chapter is the hardest to live out. I am a planner; therefore, it is hard to be in the moment. If the same is true for you, strap in for this chapter, as it might be uncomfortable.

The next chapter is “Learning to Enjoy Life: Playing Requires Permission.” Life has become very serious. We are conditioned to prioritize duty and obligation, both at work and home. As a result, play can be neglected because we feel irresponsible when we enjoy moments of life. It is thus necessary to give ourselves permission. This is a novel idea—needing permission to play. Yet, when we think about it, it makes sense. This chapter unpacks how to create personal allowance and space for play.

As a Westerner, it is tempting to frame play simply through my cultural context. Yet this would be a mistake, particularly in developing a theology of play. To appreciate the beauty of God’s multicultural world, it is essential to consider cultural particularities of play. While it is impossible to look exhaustively at culture, chapter 6, “Learning to Appreciate the World: Playing in Culture,” strives to acknowledge the unique role culture has in the topic of play.

At times, it is necessary to look backward in order to move forward. Chapter 7, “Learning to Forgive: Playing Involves Removing Unnecessary Baggage,” unearths a difficult but necessary topic for play. Hurt suffocates play. Oftentimes, we are unable to play because we are holding on to the baggage of pain and resentment. As a result, we live in the past. This chapter explores forgiveness, of self and others, as a necessary step toward play. I pray that you experience true freedom as you work through this chapter.

We live in a world of guilt and shame. We experience regrets and embarrassments. These can pile up, resulting in bondage. Chapter 8 is titled “Learning to Live in Freedom: Playing Involves Putting Aside Guilt and Shame.” Freedom is often misunderstood in society. This chapter explores the biblical concept of freedom and how it connects to one’s ability to play. The notions of shame and false guilt are discussed from a biblical perspective. If you are battling with these issues, I pray that you find peace through reading this chapter.

To truly experience play, it is necessary for it to touch every aspect of our lives. Today’s work environment is rigid, demanding, and at times

oppressive, and yet research indicates that individuals who enjoy work are more productive. The next chapter, “Learning to Lighten Up: Playing at Work,” explores the benefits of play at work, not only in terms of vocational enjoyment but also work productivity. Play has the unique power to enrich one’s job while also improving mental health—key concerns in today’s work environments. This chapter is designed for both the employer and the employee.

The true test of a theology of play is if it is applicable to the darkest moments of life. The final chapter, “Learning to Embrace Discomfort: Playing in the Pain of Life,” explores how it is often assumed that play is only possible when life is good. But to truly play it is essential to create space for play in the midst of difficulties. This chapter discusses pain from a theological perspective and how, rather than preventing us from playing, pain highlights the necessity of even more play. This chapter was deeply personal for me. I hope that anyone undergoing painful difficulties finds comfort and hope in this chapter.

I wrestled as to whether to include eleven chapters by adding one on heaven. I chose instead to have the epilogue focus on this topic. It seemed like an appropriate section to follow the chapter on pain, as well as a fitting end to the book. The epilogue is titled “Learning to Hope: Playing in Glory.” The Bible is largely silent about life in heaven. We know we will worship God. We know that our lives will be fully sanctified. We know that pain will cease to exist. I also believe that we will fully enjoy the experience, including moments of play. This epilogue inspires great anticipation for me as I look beyond this life. I hope it does for you as well.

I indicated that the first chapter lays a biblical foundation for play. Even though numerous verses are covered in this chapter, it does not comprise the summation of this book’s theological treatment. Each chapter is filled with rich theology and Bible verses. This is intentional, in order to provide a foundation for each chapter so as to present a theology that is deeply integrated and holistic.

I bathed this book deeply in prayer. I strived to faithfully honor the Word of God. As an inerrantist, I poured over each biblical reference to ensure it reflected the true intent of the passage. I did not want to force a passage into saying something that would be even remotely misaligned. I

consulted theologians and commentaries to ensure theological accuracy. And I desired to allow the text to breathe by offering a plain reading of the passages. Numerous times I wrestled over a specific word to ensure theological integrity. I understand that some might disagree with the interpretations of certain texts. However, I request that you approach this book with an open mind to its theological importance, relevance, and application to play. My prayer is that this book might offer you a different perspective on God's desire for us as his beloved creation.

To gain the most out of this book, I recommend digesting each chapter slowly. Rather than sitting down and reading the book in one sitting, take your time. Grab a cup of coffee and read through its contents leisurely and intentionally. Mull them over. You will find this book at times philosophical and other times practical. Most of all, I pray you find it helpful. Reflect on your life and your aspirations. Strive to discover the reasons that prevent you from playing so that you can step into play. View this book as a potential game changer in your life. If you want to pause and implement a particular chapter into your life before moving on to the next one, go for it. The end goal is to cultivate a lifestyle of play rather than complete the book. To do so requires time and space. To assist you, each chapter concludes with some reflection questions and helpful recommendations. I encourage you to take time to read through these practical considerations. They are designed to wrap up each chapter and move its contents into your life. Some of you process better in community. If that is you, find some friends and read the book together. This can serve as mutual encouragement and accountability. When finished, hand it off to someone else. If it blesses you, perhaps it might bless others. Lastly, enjoy this book. Have fun with it. And, most of all, begin to play!

## CHAPTER 1

# *What Is Play?*

*The true object of all human life is play.*

—G. K. Chesterton

Can you remember a time when you truly played? Can you picture the scene? I can. It was 2011. It was a perfect August day in Chicago. I was on a thirty-six-foot sailboat with my family. We had just raised the sails. The wind was blowing from the northwest at approximately ten knots. The sun was shining brightly, warming the sides of our faces. The sails were fully stretched with a small hint of luffing. We could hear seagulls on a breakwater as we left the harbor. The sound of the city grew fainter as we headed east toward open water with only a few boats in sight. We were laughing and smiling as the wind gently whipped through our hair. My son was enjoying the winches on the boat. My wife stretched out her legs in the boat's cockpit. I handed the wheel to my daughter and she guided us into the large expanse of Lake Michigan.

I felt free. I had no care in the world. I was in the moment. I was living life to the fullest. It seemed as if time had stopped. If someone had photographed that moment, I would have had a smile stretched across my face. Life seemed rich and full. It was an experience I wished would never have to end. Even now, I am smiling thinking about the emotions of being free to simply let go and play. Can you recall your own moment?

What if these moments were not nostalgic experiences but regular parts of our lives? What if we were able to harness this perspective so it

not only characterized an event but became embedded into our attitude in life? What if play became a part of our daily lives, like drinking coffee or combing our hair? Would it not revolutionize our lives?

## PLAY DEFINED

*Play* is a word easily recognizable but defined differently depending on the person and the context. I could poll one hundred persons regarding their definitions of *play*, and I would likely get one hundred different responses. For some, it is defined in the context of sports, such as playing football or soccer. For others, it is a theatrical performance: “I went to a musical play.” For many, it is what occurs during an activity, “I went bowling and just played for the evening.”

The English language is complicated. We can use the same word in different ways, and it captures an entirely different meaning. In the case of *play*, it can be a noun or a verb. It can be an activity or the action within that activity. *Play* can also be used as an adjective, as in “Dancing is a playful activity.” For most people, the play that is most attractive involves spontaneous, leisurely moments in life when you experience life to the fullest. It involves the experience of freedom and joy in loving a moment in life.

In this book, I want to propose that we see play as a characteristic of our lives rather than separate from our lives, regardless of whether it is a noun, verb, or adjective. I want us to embrace a lifestyle of play, a mindset of play. I want play to infuse our being so that it changes how we see life.

As a Christian, I am defining play as *the God-given ability and permission to fully enjoy moments in life as God intended, with freedom and pleasure*. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This passage is appropriately understood as involving the spiritual realm—that we are to find fullness of life in redemption. However, I believe Jesus has a more holistic perspective in mind—that we, in all aspects of life, can enjoy life abundantly, viewing all life as spiritual, since we are made in God’s image and living in God’s world. Thus, an abundant life involves contentment in God’s physical blessings. It consists of joy in using the gifts and abilities God has given to us. It embodies thankfulness that as created beings we have the capacity to love another person. Yet it



should also involve play—moments to fully and leisurely celebrate life.

For context, in the next verse, Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd.” Certainly, our Good Shepherd desires that we enjoy his good world. Play is an expression of this enjoyment—a life perspective that seeks to enjoy the everyday moments of life.

## CONFESSION

I need to confess something immediately in the opening pages of this book. The book is not simply for others; it is for me. I am a perfectionist. In fact, I like to perfect perfectionism. There are type A people. My son jokes that I am a triple-A battery. As a result, I am highly driven. I am always setting goals. I am striving to excel in all areas—vocationally and personally. Even a simple pleasure such as jogging can easily turn into a competition with myself. I desire to improve my time every time I run, to the precise second. When I miss the mark, there is some disappointment. Fellow perfectionists are nodding their heads in agreement; non-perfectionists are perplexed, saying, “Just enjoy the run!”

There are some people who are past-driven. They are always looking backward at mistakes or regrets. That is not me. I tend to live by the mantra *carpe diem*, or “seize the day.” For me, ambition is my primary barrier to play.

Personally, I need this book. I need to think more deeply about play. I need to wrestle with the things in my life that prevent me from playing. I need to embody a more playful attitude. In some respects, I hope this book is therapeutic for me. I hope I can begin to practice the very thing that I long for—to play.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PLAY?

There are few references to play in the Bible. In each case, they describe an act. And they each involve children and animals. The passages involving children are Job 41:5 and Matthew 11:16–17. Job 41:5 asks, “Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your girls?” This verse references Leviathan, asking whether one can play with such a formidable creature. Matthew 11:16–17 states, “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces

and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’”

The primary purpose of these verses in Matthew is to unpack a spiritual truth—the fickleness of religious leaders to dismiss John the Baptist and Jesus. I recognize this intent. However, in both Matthew and Job, play is viewed as morally neutral. In the first reference, it is a leisure exchange; in the second passage, it captures a skillful act—to successfully produce music using an instrument. In each case, there is nothing wrong with the act of playing. John Nolland, in his commentary on Matthew, stated, “It is clear that the playing of the flute is an invitation to dance, perhaps at a wedding” (2005, 461). Affirmed in these verses is a liberating truth: play is a normal aspect of life affirmed in Scripture.

There are two references in the Bible to animals playing. Psalm 104:25–26 states,

Here is the sea, great and wide,  
which teems with creatures innumerable,  
living things both small and great.  
There go the ships,  
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

Job 40:20 references the arena for Behemoth by stating, “For the mountains yield food for him where all the wild beasts play.” Like the passages related to children, playing in the sea and in the mountains are viewed as morally neutral forms of pleasure. The passages describe leisure in the natural order. Both children and animals are described as playing in God’s world.

If children and animals are permitted to play, why not adults? If children are described as participating in play in a way that is natural and amoral, should not adults equally be permitted to do so? Adults are no less human than children. Yet, why is it that play sometimes stops once we reach adulthood?

### ***Implied Passages of Play***

In addition to direct references to play, I would argue that the idea of play is implied throughout Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is not to

be exhaustive but rather to present the essential record of God's story and the requisite instruction and teaching necessary to live a Christ-centered, gospel-informed, fulfilled life. It would be a mistake to exclude certain aspects of life simply because they are not recorded in Scripture. For example, Scripture does not discuss vacationing, yet it is an acceptable, embraced part of life. For me, play lands in this space. It is an implied reality in Scripture.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 states, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." One of the times described is laughing and dancing: "a time to weep, and a time to *laugh*; a time to mourn, and a time to *dance*" (3:4). Scripture explicitly records that we should laugh, and we should dance. In his work on Ecclesiastes, J. Stafford Wright stated, "A Christian should not be perpetually facetious, but neither should he avoid occasions of social happiness" (1991, 1161). To this, I say a hearty "Amen."

Laughing and dancing sound a lot like play to me!

## ***The Old Testament***

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed to celebrate feasts and festivals. These events had specific spiritual intents and instructions. However, they were also times in the year when Jews could break from work, reflect on Yahweh, and simply be. Yes, there were offerings and spiritual tasks to be conducted; however, these events consisted of times to celebrate with others in the community.

Leviticus 23 introduces the primary Jewish feasts. Verses 1–2 state, "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.'" Laird Harris, in his commentary, stated that the word *feasts* "is misleading" (1990, 622). The phrase "set celebrations" might be better (Harris 1990, 622). The rationale is that these events were not simply meals but times of celebration. Celebration in the Old Testament involved more than food; it included singing and playing instruments. They were moments to rejoice in God's work.

When I hear Christians discuss the Israelite feasts and festivals, it is typically with the goal of understanding the spiritual significance of them, particularly how they point to Christ. This should be the primary task for

Christians. However, is it not also helpful to see the day-to-day living that occurred in the midst of the feasts and festivals and apart from the offerings and religious tasks? There certainly were playful moments between the formal religious activities. These occasions were opportunities for God's people to be present in community, apart from work, for the purpose of enjoying God's gift of life, provision, and redemption. This is helpful instruction to us when we see these passages in their lived realities. People loved life. They celebrated God's work. They fellowshiped around meals. They were certainly *enjoying life as God intended, with freedom and pleasure*. I believe one reason God commanded feasts and festivals throughout the year was to force people to break, rest, and enjoy life. Apart from clear instruction to do so, humans are prone to follow routine. And routine becomes the breeding ground for the mundane—a life of duty without play.

### ***The New Testament***

In John 2:1–12, we see Jesus attending a wedding. During this wedding, Jesus performed one of his first miracles when he turned water into wine, typically understood as the first sign of his divinity in John's gospel. It is a marvelous scene. It is a passage where his divine nature is illustrated. Most certainly, this is the primary purpose of these verses in John's gospel. Yet we should not overlook the context of verses 1–2: "On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples." There was a wedding with celebration, food, and certainly dancing. Individuals were at play. And Jesus was present. I imagine he enjoyed himself at the wedding. After all, he encouraged the celebration by making wine from water. A careful reading of the passage highlights that the only individuals who knew Jesus performed the miracle were his mother, the disciples, and the servants. Jesus did not broadcast the miracle. In the moment, he performed this act so that others could continue enjoying the wedding. He was encouraging the celebration. He endorsed this moment of play.

### ***Spiritually Integrated Play***

Second Samuel 6:16 states, "As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and

saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart.” This activity was a spiritual moment of worship. David made offerings to the Lord and celebrated God’s sovereignty and goodness. And, in this act, in the presence of the ark, David leaped and danced. David experienced pleasure. And God was pleased. Dance in this passage is clearly connected to a spiritual moment of worship. It was not simply a leisure event.

For some theologians, this passage endorses vibrant worship—meaning individuals should dance and leap, but only within the confines of worship. I would like to broaden our understanding of worship. In the Old Testament, worship was largely confined to a locale. People traveled for certain festivals, such as the Day of Atonement, because worship was linked to the presence of the Lord. And, since God dwelled in the temple, individuals traveled to its location to worship. The temple of God resided in a place.

In the New Testament, the temple no longer resides in a place; it is in persons. Paul wrote, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The temple is no longer stationary in a location; it is embodied in humans. We are mobile temples. The presence of God resides in us as his individual arks. This truth communicates the liberating power of the gospel—the incarnational nature of God’s presence in humans through the Holy Spirit.

As Christians, we are to embody Christ in all aspects of life. Paul wrote in that passage that we are to glorify God with our bodies. Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (10:31). Glorifying God is not relegated to dedicated spiritual acts such as worship, Bible reading, or church attendance. It involves every aspect of our lives, including eating and drinking. For me, these verses articulate a powerful truth. We are to worship God always, on every occasion, because we are temples of God—dwellings for the Holy Spirit. If this is true, every aspect of life should be worshipful. Worship should then be evident in community gatherings, such as church, Bible studies, and fellowship, and also in family and individual moments,

such as vacations, dinners, teaching moments, leisure activities, and even chores. Worship is thus a state of being, not an act.

To draw inference from David, if God was pleased with David's worship, which included dancing, should not our everyday, commonplace moments of worship also allow for dancing? And, if dancing is an expression of play, cannot our play be worshipful to God, not in a formal sense but as leisure moments when we celebrate life? What I am arguing for is a view that sees play not as isolated from spirituality but as an expression of spirituality, like eating and drinking, as Paul said. Play can be worshipful in that it expresses our delight with God by living the abundant life in all aspects. In this sense, worship and play, while at times explicitly and expressly focused on celebrating God's nature, can also be embodied in the natural rhythms of life when we are conscious of God but not necessarily verbally declaring him.

## PLAY REDEEMED

Play is not uniquely Christian. It is a human reality. Yet play can be redeemed by Christians. I have stated that play is morally neutral. However, that does not mean play does not have moral expressions. An individual can be "playing" during a game of soccer but do so competitively and selfishly. In this sense, play becomes all about the individual. In other cases, a person "plays" while attending a party, only to find themselves getting drunk. This expression of play is immoral. An individual can also have a carefree mentality whereby their focus is on enjoying life—"I just want to play." If prolonged, this attitude of play can neglect human responsibilities of duty and family. In these instances, play is perhaps an escape from reality.

While play is morally neutral, it finds worshipful expression when it is within the parameters of moral living. In this sense, we become genuinely human by living the life God intended for us. Play in this regard is truly free, not by escaping reality but by embracing true reality—the life God intended for us, one of righteousness and holiness. By fully embracing Christ, we are free to live in freedom and pleasure. And, when we understand that life is to be enjoyed in all its wonders, play becomes permissible and life-giving.

Play is also a vehicle for celebration. When something good happens in life, we want to express it through leisure. We want to go have fun and enjoy the moment. It is an opportunity to live and smile. As Christians, we are redeemed. We have been delivered from sin. Christ has rescued us. An eternal home awaits us. Should we not play in beautiful and celebratory ways in response to God's work in our lives? Furthermore, should not Christians be the most playful, since we can play as God intended? Play for Christians is not an escape from the challenges of life but an attitude of celebration, even in the midst of life's difficulties. Play is not carefree living but purposeful enjoyment of life.

Play gives us pleasure, but it also gives God pleasure. God delights when we live as he intended, including moments of play. If play is a part of being human in this world—an expression of leisure and an attitude of enjoyment, should not Christians be the first to embrace play? Should we not play as a means of worship as image bearers of God? Should we not model play to the world in a way that is freeing and life-giving? Should we not celebrate play in others rather than stifle it? In other words, why should non-Christians have the most “fun” when in fact God infused play into the fabric of life? Since we know the Creator and Author of play, we are at an advantage in that we can play as God desires—with freedom and pleasure, living life abundantly.

As I write this chapter, my son has just finished an intense season. He completed his junior year of high school, which involved taking three AP exams and the SAT. In addition to the rigors of preparing for these tests during school, he also studied at home, using various preparatory books. During this time, he also competed on the track team, attended prom, participated in his youth group and small groups, practiced karate, and worked part time. It was not uncommon during this two-month stretch for him to get five hours of sleep. There were days when he was exhausted and frustrated at the pace of life. During this season, he longed for a moment of play—to go enjoy life without demands and responsibilities. He wanted to just live in the moment, not for some future test or obligation. He wanted to be free to laugh and joke. As his parents, we were proud of his work ethic and commitment to success in school and life. And because we deeply love him, we also wanted him to enjoy life.

So we encouraged him on numerous occasions to take a break and “go play.” We would tell him to go hang out with his friends, enjoy a movie, or grab something to eat with his youth group. These moments were life-giving because they allowed him to be free and spontaneous, even briefly, from life’s responsibilities. They were not an escape from reality, as mentioned above, because he wanted to work hard, but rather they were a simple reprieve to enjoy life. We love him and so we wanted him to play because it invigorated him. It was both good and necessary for his management of life.

God loves us. He sees the demands and responsibilities of life. He knows that we have duties and obligations—to work and to family. He recognizes that life is difficult and hard because of sin. He knows that at times we are holding on by a thread, feeling frustrated, exasperated, and overwhelmed. Because he loves us, he not only permits play but wants us to play. He desires for us to be free and spontaneous, even briefly, from life’s responsibilities. He recognizes that it is both good and necessary for us. Play is a means by which God provides a life-giving oasis in the desert moments of life.

## WHY THE WORD *PLAY*

You might be asking, why are you choosing the word *play*. Would it not be more biblically accurate to use the word *joy* instead of *play*? For me, joy is a feeling of pleasure based on our identity and salvation in Christ. We have joy because of who we are in Christ. In this sense, it is largely attached to the truth that we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). It is directly connected to our relationship with God.

Play, on the other hand, is being defined as *the God-given ability and permission to fully enjoy moments in life as God intended, with freedom and pleasure*. It involves the horizontal plane as residents in this world. It is a way of approaching life that is celebratory and natural. It is a manner by which we affirm our security in Christ that then allows us to be present in the moment. It is permission to enjoy the goodness of God within his good world.

And truthfully, I chose *play* because it vividly captures something that we long for in life. Who does not want to play? Who does not want



to let go and live a little? Who does not get to the end of a busy week and say, “I just want to go play”? For me, I want to play in life. I want to be more playful. It is incredibly enticing. For me, I miss being a child, the time when I could be in the moment and laugh. I believe this joy is God’s desire for us. It is not simply a component of childhood. It is an aspect of life. Play sounds so appealing to me. So I am choosing *play* to help us recapture how we can see life. Is it the most biblically accurate word? Possibly not. But it does visually capture something that is deeply missing in the church and among Christians.

## SUMMARIZING THOUGHTS

Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton wrote,

It is not only possible to say a great deal in praise of play; it is really possible to say the highest things in praise of it. It might reasonably be maintained that the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground. To be at last in such secure innocence that one can juggle with the universe and the stars, to be so good that one can treat everything as a joke—that may be, perhaps, the real end and final holiday of human souls. (2009, 35)

In essence, we oftentimes view the real action as eventually taking place in heaven. As such, we view earth as a time of waiting for that eventual consummation. As a result, this earthly life becomes very serious, a “task garden,” rather than a time to inaugurate a bit of that “heavenly playground” in this world—a taste of our “real end and final holiday.” God desires that we play in the here and now. It is a gift for us as his beloved creations. It is a way to celebrate this glorious life that he has given to us. And by enjoying this gift, it is a means to honor him as our benevolent God and Creator.

## REFLECTION

To reimagine our lives around play requires reflection. Our definition of play has likely been framed around activities or leisure, or it is an

aspect of our distance past—childhood. For others, it is something that seems impossible due to our hectic, stressful lives. Thinking of play as an ongoing aspect of life requires focus, attention, and reorientation. It involves believing that God permits and desires for his children to play.

I encourage you to take time to mull over the following questions and then respond honestly. Allow yourself to move toward an attitude of play. Be patient with yourself, as life reorientation takes time. But begin the process of *enjoying life as God intended*.

1. Think about a moment when you truly played. What were you doing? What did you feel? How did you see life?
2. When you think of play, what comes to mind? What characterizes an experience of play?
3. Do you believe God gives you permission to play? Why or why not?
4. What is preventing you from seeing play as an act of worship?
5. What is one thing you can do to begin moving toward an attitude of play?