

UCHE ANIZOR

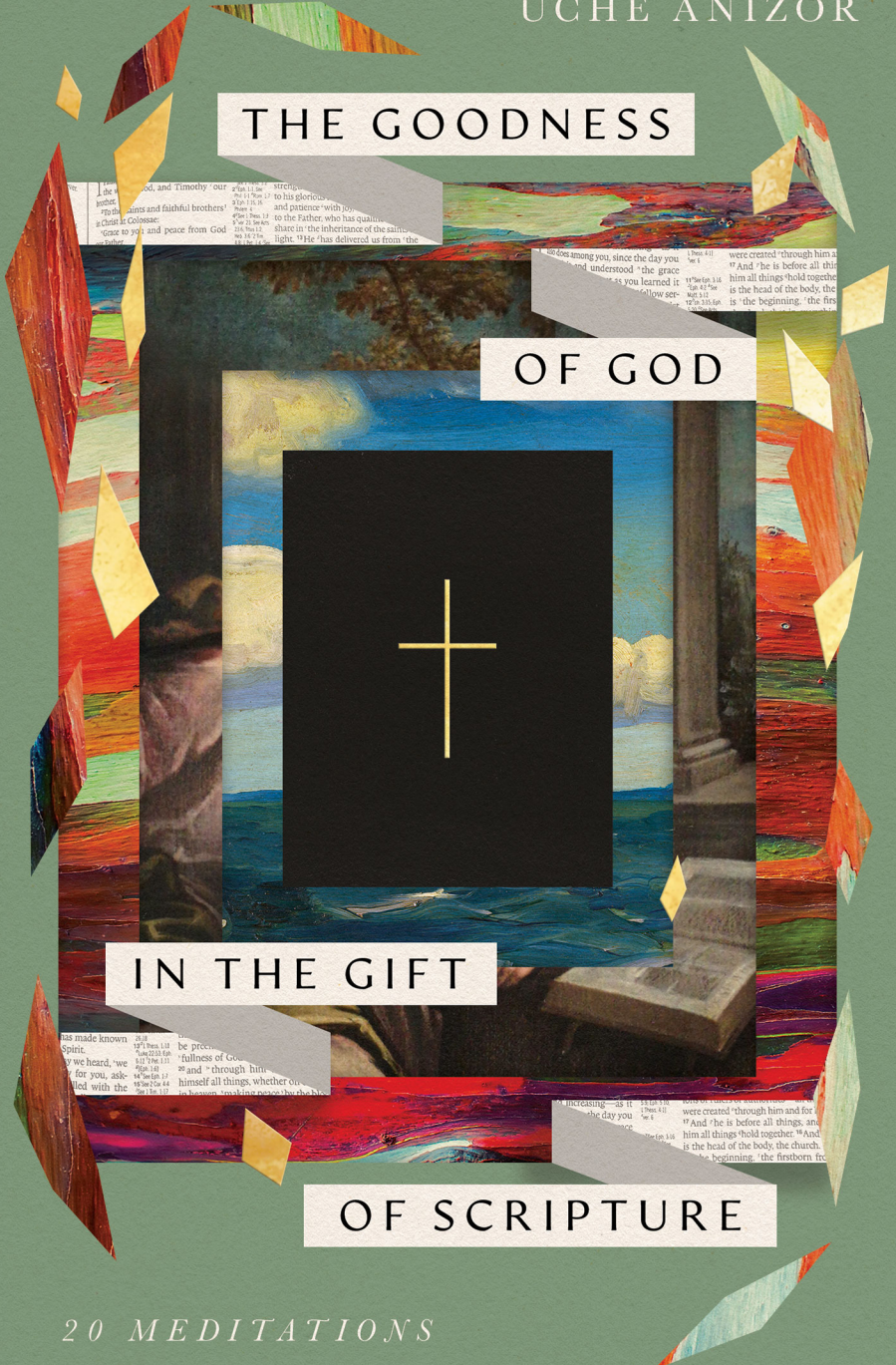
THE GOODNESS

OF GOD

IN THE GIFT

OF SCRIPTURE

20 MEDITATIONS



“Too many otherwise solid books about the Bible sound as if they are speaking about it from outside, from some distance. Uche Anizor’s *The Goodness of God in the Gift of Scripture* speaks from inside, from a place of deep insight into how God gives Scripture to draw us near. This book is a major spiritual corrective in a modest devotional package.”

Fred Sanders, Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors College,
Biola University

“Uche Anizor skillfully presents the Bible as a gift to be opened and eagerly received, an extension of the God who breathed it out. Like all gifts, the Scriptures are not owed to us but freely given out of God’s love and grace, inviting people to know him. This book—packaged beautifully with illustrations, quotes, and stirring hymns—invites readers to unwrap the treasures of hope, strength, wisdom, warnings, and more that are found in the Scriptures.”

Colleen D. Searcy, Bible teacher; minister; author and creator,
the Meet Me in the Bible series and workshops

“The apostle Paul inquires, ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 Cor. 4:7). We rightly reply, ‘Nothing whatsoever,’ then give God thanks for every good gift: creation, our very lives, the grace of salvation, our churches, and much more. Uche Anizor provocatively wonders if we would put the Bible on that list. We *receive* it. It’s the word *from God*. But Anizor challenges us if we find applying and submitting to the Bible difficult because we don’t truly believe that it is a good gift from God to us. If you long to embrace the Bible as a grace, a gift that stimulates your love for and thankfulness to God, then this book is for you.”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary; Secretary, Evangelical Theological Society

“God’s word is indeed the gift that keeps on giving, straight from the mouth of our kind and generous God. *The Goodness of God in the Gift of Scripture* will stir your thinking, kindle your affections, and increase your gratitude for the Bible and all the ways that God intends to use it to nourish your soul. I highly recommend this book to you.”

Kristen Wetherell, author, *Help for the Hungry Soul* and the For the Bible Tells Me So board book series

“Uche Anizor writes with a rare combination of theological depth, pastoral warmth, and practical clarity. In this book, he invites us to see the Scriptures not as a burdensome duty but as a gracious gift through which we experience the goodness of God. This is theology for discipleship: rich in truth, stirring in devotion, and practical for everyday life. I highly recommend it.”

Jeremy Treat, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality LA,
Los Angeles, California; Professor of Theology, Biola University;
author, *The Crucified King*; *Seek First*; and *The Atonement*

“Uche Anizor has again blessed the church with a book that is simple enough to pass on to a new Christian yet insightful enough to bless the seasoned Christian. By showing readers that Scripture is an expression of God’s goodness that transforms our lives in so many ways, these twenty meditations are a wonderful addition to a Christian’s personal time in Bible reading and prayer, a family’s supper-time oral reading, or a group devoted to study and worship. Who wouldn’t want such gifts as blessedness, freedom from shame, peace, nourishment, life, joy, righteousness, hope—among the many other gifts that come from immersing ourselves in God’s word? Throughout my reading, I found myself captivated by insights I hadn’t noticed before, drawn into worship at the wonder of our great salvation, and thankful for the way this book further stoked my passion for God’s word.”

Ian J. Vaillancourt, Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew,
Heritage Theological Seminary; author, *Unfolding Redemption*

The Goodness of God in the Gift of Scripture

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20 Meditations

Uche Anizor

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*For Melissa,
true woman of the word*

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Introduction

Our Good God and the Grace of Scripture

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY pastor and writer A. W. Tozer famously wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.” The shape of our worship and the course of our lives are dictated by our sense of what God is like. This conviction led Tozer to conclude that “the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.”¹

I have often wondered if what Tozer said about our view of God is equally true regarding our view of Scripture, God’s word. What comes into our minds when we think about the Bible?

Imagine you are playing one of those word games that requires you to give one-word clues to describe something. The word

1 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Lutterworth, 2022), 1.

Bible comes up on the next card. Assuming that you can't use a synonym like *Scripture*, what other words would you use to describe it? *Truth? Revelation? Rulebook? Law?* All valid descriptions. I wonder, however, if the word *gift* would be the first, second, or third thing that comes to mind for many of us. Certainly, most of us would affirm that Scripture is a gift—and we may highly esteem it—but *gift* would likely not be the first word association our minds would make. Yet making that association is incalculably important if we are going to approach God's word rightly.

I suspect that one of the main reasons we sometimes have difficulty putting God's word into practice or submitting to it joyfully is that we don't believe—in our heart of hearts—that it is good for us. If the Bible is somehow repressive or oppressive, why would we submit to its ways (especially if it actually *does* make life harder)? Behind our hesitancy regarding Scripture is often a cautious, though neither malicious nor brazen, distrust of God's goodness. But even when our trust in God appears relatively intact, we can still find ourselves resistant to Scripture's wisdom and demands. We fail to see it as a gift to embrace, as the grace of God itself and not merely a means of grace. We question if there is really a short- or long-term advantage to following God's sometimes-peculiar ways. And so we stop short of giving ourselves over fully to Scripture's teaching and, perhaps, pick and choose the elements of it that we, in our limited wisdom, see as making sense. In doing this, we cut ourselves off from the fullness of the grace that is Scripture—a grace that is manifold, rich, life-giving, and satisfying.

What comes into our minds when we think about God's word may prove to be the most important thing about us.

The Theme of Our Song

The simple affirmation of the goodness of God's word has been the refrain of God's people throughout the generations. The psalmist writes,

Turn away the reproach that I dread,
for your rules are good. (Ps. 119:39)

What underlies this affirmation is the basic belief that God is a kind ruler who gives good rules. As God and his word are inseparable (something we will come back to shortly), so the goodness of God and the goodness of Scripture are intertwined.

At the beginning of 2 Peter, we see the beautiful connection between the goodness of God and the gift of his word. Peter begins, "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (1:3 CSB). God, in the person of Jesus himself, has equipped us with everything we need to live godly lives, but access to these resources comes only through knowing him. He calls us into this knowledge out of his own glory and goodness. Peter continues, "By these he has given us very great and precious promises" (1:4a CSB). Animated by that same glory and goodness, Jesus gave us the promises of his word. In other words, the Scriptures are an overflow of God's goodness and gracious disposition toward us. The "great and precious promises" have a goal: "so that through them you may share in the divine

nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world” (1:4b). God desires that we should reflect him—“share in the divine nature”—and this is for our ultimate and eternal good. To fulfill that goal, he gave us the Scriptures and its many promises. The goodness of God is expressed in the gift of Scripture.

John Calvin, after a careful exposition of how God reveals himself in creation, turns his attention to the Scriptures. He observes that while creation truly does furnish us with a knowledge of God, “it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe.” God gave us the “privilege” of his word so that he might “become known unto salvation” and so that we might be gathered “more closely and intimately to himself.” This, Calvin poetically concludes, “is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers [i.e., the created order] but also opens his own most hallowed lips.”² Creation is a gift, and God’s self-disclosure in creation is a gift. But the greater grace is God opening his “hallowed lips” in Scripture to bring us into a clear-eyed knowledge of him. Scripture is the gift of clear sight to those who are largely blind.

Christians rightly acknowledge, extol, and even write hymns about the goodness of God in the gift of Scripture! The early twentieth century saw a number of such hymns written by evangelicals. For example, the second stanza of “Oh, Wonderful Word!” declares,

Oh, wonderful, wonderful Word of the Lord!
The lamp that our Father above

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.6.1 (1:70).

So kindly has lighted to teach us the way
That leads to the arms of his love!³

And another hymn, referring to Scripture, exclaims,

There Thy holy will we read,
There upon Thy grace we feed;
There find guidance for our way,
And correction when we stray.⁴

Notice the common themes of these songs. The wonderful word of the Lord was given out of God's kindness and mercy to lead us to his arms of love. By his good word, we feed on his grace. The word resounds with the loving heart of God. The giving of Scripture is the grace of God in concrete form. This, among other things, has always been a theme of our song as God's people.

God's Loving Verbal Presence

In lauding and praising the Scriptures, are we giving to a book the honor due to God alone? Are we committing bibliolatry, the supposed idolizing of the Bible? These questions have already been answered to some degree, but they are worth addressing more specifically. Perhaps the place to begin is Scripture, listening to the way it speaks of itself and following the connections it makes between God and his word.

In a song seeking God's protection from his enemies, the psalmist writes,

3 Fanny Crosby, "Oh, Wonderful Word!" (1887). Public domain.

4 H. F. Lyte, "Well Thy Works Proclaim Thee" (1911). Public domain.

In God, whose word I praise,
 in the LORD, whose word I praise,
 in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. (Ps. 56:10–11)

On the surface, this is a very odd and unexpected coupling of items. “When I am afraid, I put my trust in God,” says the psalmist. So far, so good. But rather than extolling the Lord who has delivered him, he repeats three times, “I praise God’s word!” (56:4, 10 [2x]). Scripture clearly encourages, perhaps summons, us to praise God’s word. The question becomes, “How do we do this in a way that always honors the Lord?”

When we affirm that Scripture is the word of God, we are saying that whenever Scripture speaks, God speaks. When Scripture speaks a word of comfort, God is speaking that word of comfort. When the Bible proclaims God’s promises, we believe that God himself is proclaiming those words of promise. God is present wherever and whenever his word is read, spoken, prayed, or sung. But his presence is neither physical nor mystical; rather, his presence is verbal but no less real.

Imagine receiving a letter from a loved one who is thousands of miles away. While he is nowhere near you physically, every sentence of his letter makes him present to you. And his presence is neither merely imaginary nor in the form of memories that the letter evokes. Instead, because the letter is an expression of himself—his heart, his humor, his concerns—you are interacting with him as you read. The letter is an extension of him.

Or imagine waking up to a note on the kitchen table that reads, “Please take out the trash,” written by your mother. At the risk of asking an obvious question, “Who is issuing the command?”

Certainly, it's not the note itself commanding you to do your chore. Rather, there is a person speaking to you, making her presence felt in the form of a scribbled-down note. To disregard her instruction would be to disregard her.

In a similar way, Scripture, as an articulate, clear, deliberate, and sufficient letter or note from God, is an extension of himself into our time and space and circumstance. Therefore, as one writer puts it, "To encounter the words of Scripture is to encounter God in action."⁵ Or as Augustine counsels, "Treat the scripture of God as the face of God."⁶ God and his word are inseparable. This is why it is entirely appropriate to sing love songs and hymns to God's word. God and his word together are our crown, our distinctive glory as his people. Do we believe this?

The Bible's Song About the Bible

My modest aim in this book is to help us retrieve a sense of the goodness of Scripture, to recapture the conviction that God's word to us is a gift given for our earthly and eternal happiness. My hope is that when we receive the Bible as grace to us, that attitude will foster a love and gratitude in our hearts for its encouragements and instructions.

This book comprises twenty brief meditations rooted mainly in Psalm 119, Scripture's own love song to Scripture. In each chapter's meditation, I do two things. First, I highlight one gift (or benefit) we receive from God's word. The psalmist sees Scripture

5 Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (IVP Academic, 2009), 48.

6 Augustine, "Sermon 22.7," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 3, *Homilies*, vol. 2, *Sermons 20–50 on the Old Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill (New City Press, 2009), 46.

as a gift that keeps on giving gifts—that is, a fountain of blessings from God. I have selected twenty such blessings, each chapter showcasing one. Second, I demonstrate that each benefit or act of blessing attributed to God’s word in Psalm 119 is elsewhere, in the Bible, attributed to God himself. In highlighting this, I am trying to press home the wonderful truth that God, the source of all blessing, has chosen his word as the primary way to connect us to that blessing. His giving is often done through Scripture, and this should drive us to his word, eagerly expecting to receive good—not harm—from him.

I recommend reading each chapter meditatively rather than speeding through the book, perhaps reading one chapter each weekday over four weeks. Each chapter concludes with a song or prayer that you can either sing or say back to God. The goal here is love: to love God through loving his word, to so treasure God’s speaking voice in Scripture that we would view it as more valuable than a new car or dream home. As the psalmist writes,

The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Ps. 119:72)

Therefore I love your commandments
above gold, above fine gold. (119:127)

The Gift of Blessedness

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the LORD!
 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
 who seek him with their whole heart.*

PSALM 119:1–2

THE FIRST WORD in the book of Psalms is “blessed.” True blessedness is, in a sense, the theme of the Psalter. It is noteworthy, then, that the theme of blessedness in Psalm 1 is linked to our attitude toward God’s law, and this is at the very beginning of Israel’s songbook. This should grab our attention because it signals that the blessedness of being God’s people—the blessedness *from* and *about* which we sing—is wonderfully connected to our relationship to his word.

Psalm 119—the longest psalm of all—begins similarly: “Blessed are those . . . / who walk in the law of the LORD! / . . . who keep his testimonies” (119:1–2). Blessedness is the

theme of Psalm 119, and the psalm as a whole may be seen as an expanded meditation on the blessedness that comes through God's word. So it is fitting to pause and reflect on what it means to be "blessed."

#Blessed

I have a nagging sense that when we read the word *blessed*, we either feel indifferent or suspicious. Both of these responses are likely the result of the way the term is (over)used in our day-to-day lives. Scrolling through social media, you'll find pictures of people admiring themselves in the mirror with the caption "#Blessed." We see posts of luxurious spa days, beautiful vacations, acceptance letters to grad school, perfect family pictures—not to mention the extravagant exploits of countless celebrities—all tagged with "#Blessed." One writer remarks cynically,

Calling something "blessed" has become the go-to term for those who want to boast about an accomplishment while pretending to be humble, fish for a compliment, acknowledge a success (without sounding too conceited), or purposely elicit envy. Blessed . . . is now used to explain that coveted Ted talk invite as well as to celebrate your grandmother's 91st birthday.¹

In our culture, to be blessed is to have something you know many others would want or something you know is beyond the experience of the average person. This same writer quips,

1 Jessica Bennet, "They Feel 'Blessed,'" *New York Times*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

“There’s nothing quite like invoking holiness as a way to brag about your life.” While there are many examples of the term being used in appropriate and even humble ways, the omnipresence of its use, the things it is normally attached to, and the context in which it’s used has largely cheapened what should be a rich and meaningful term. Does this way of understanding the blessed life have any connection to the biblical meaning of the word?

There are two Hebrew terms normally translated “blessed.” The first, *baruk*, often refers to giving or receiving some kind of gift. In the creation account, the man and woman are “blessed” as those created in God’s image and called to carry out his mandate (Gen. 1:28). Abraham is “blessed” as the partner in God’s covenant (12:2). In this case, blessing is about bestowing gifts from one party to another. The second term, *ashre*, refers to the state of true happiness, and it is this term that we find here in Psalm 119, as well as in Psalm 1. Now being “blessed” (*baruk*) and being happy (*ashre*) are clearly related. The one who experiences true blessedness (*ashre*) is certainly someone blessed (*baruk*) by God. The terms overlap but are distinct. Outward blessing is not an automatic indicator that someone’s life is truly blessed (*ashre*). Celebrity lives are a cautionary tale in this regard.

This is also the sense of blessedness we find in the Beatitudes. Our Lord says, “Blessed are those who mourn. . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:4, 10). True happiness is not found in circumstances or in stuff. Mourning and persecution are not the kinds of things we would normally label with #Blessed. True happiness is being seen as we really are by God. In fact, true happiness *is* being connected to

God despite our situation or feelings. To be blessed is to experience fullness of life.

Sharing God's Triune Blessedness

In two astonishing passages, the apostle Paul describes God himself as *makarios*, which is the Greek term that translates the Hebrew *ashre* and means “blessed” or simply “happy.” The apostle describes the good news as “the gospel of the glory of the *blessed* God” (1 Tim. 1:11) and God as “he who is the *blessed* and only Sovereign” (6:15). God is the happy God. He possesses perfect fullness of life in himself. This is his blessedness, and he wants to share this with us.

To be blessed is to experience fullness of life in communion with the triune God. C. S. Lewis writes, “The whole purpose for which we exist is to be thus taken into the life of God.”² He adds, “The whole dance or drama or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or (putting it the other way round) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made.”³ We were made for blessedness, a happiness that has eternal and infinitely deep roots. Lewis depicts this happiness poetically as an intra-Trinitarian dance or drama, a shared love and delight that always exists among the three persons of the Godhead. It is unimaginably rich and all-satisfying, even if currently incomprehensible. God made us to be filled to overflowing with this kind of life. Ultimately, for the Christian, true blessedness is being “in Christ,” which enables us to somehow experience this

2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2000), 161.

3 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.

intra-Trinitarian fullness of life. God desires to fill our lives out of the overflow of his blessedness. He made us and redeemed us to be really and truly happy.

We All Want to Be Happy

Everybody, rightly, wants to be happy. This legitimate human drive is not ignored or pooh-poohed by God. Instead, through the psalmist, he lays out for us the path to true happiness.

To begin, the psalmist writes, “Truly happy are those whose way is blameless—namely, those who walk in the law of Yahweh!” (Ps. 119:1 AT). This verse parallels Psalm 1 in repeating the refrain of blessedness coming to those who walk in the way of torah. The word *law* here is taken by many to mean “instruction” and it includes all of God’s revelation. Happy are those who obey the Lord’s instruction and follow his guidance and teaching. An autonomous, self-reliant life does not lead to happiness. It is noteworthy that blamelessness is paralleled with obedience to God’s instruction. The psalmist makes a similar move in the second verse: “Truly happy are those who keep his testimonies—that is, those who seek him with their whole heart” (119:2 AT). There is no mystery to what it means to seek the Lord wholeheartedly. It is to “keep” his testimonies, which means to observe or put into practice the decrees of God.

Yet Scripture is abundantly clear that blessedness comes from God. *He* is the bestower of true happiness. Here are several examples:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered. (Ps. 32:1)

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage! (33:12)

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (34:8)

Blessed is the one you choose and bring near. (65:4)

Blessed are those whose strength is in you. (84:5)

Blessed are the people to whom such blessings fall!

Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD! (144:15)

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. (Matt. 5:11–12)

Blessed (Heb. *ashre*, Gk. *makarios*) are those who are forgiven, protected, brought near, chosen, strengthened, and rewarded *by God!* These benefits and privileges are just a few dimensions of the blessed life. These passages could be multiplied tenfold. And it is not headline news that God is the source of this blessedness. Psalm 119 is a poetic and devotional exploration of the many dimensions of the blessed life given graciously by God. But we are to keep in mind that God, the giver of blessedness, often does not work alone, so to speak. He uses a gift to give his other gifts. “Blessed are those . . . *who walk in the law of the Lord*” (Ps. 119:1). The life of true happiness that we crave, the life of fullness that God desires to give, is bestowed to us through the means of his good word. Those who give earnest attention to his

law and devote their whole hearts to knowing and following it
can expect true blessedness, both now and forevermore.

How happy they who know the Lord,
With whom he deigns to dwell!
He feeds and cheers them by his word,
His arm supports them well.

Wandering in sin, our souls he found,
And bid us seek his face;
Gave us to hear the gospel sound,
And taste the gospel grace.

His presence sweetens all their cares,
And makes their burdens light;
A word from him dispels their fears,
And breaks the gloom of night.

Let us enjoy and highly prize
These tokens of thy love:
Till thou shalt bid our spirits rise,
To worship thee above.

JOHN NEWTON

“O Happy They Who Know the Lord”

1779

