

JOHN PIPER

Foreword by David Platt

New York Times best-selling author of Radical

RISK

IS RIGHT

Better to Lose Your Life **Than to Waste It**

Risk Is Right: Better to Lose Your Life Than to Waste It

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CONTENTS

Foreword by David Platt	7
1 The Ultimate Meaning of Life	13
2 What Is Risk?	17
3 Stories of Risk in the Old Testament	23
4 The Great Risk Taker in the New Testament	27
5 When the People of God Risk and When They Don't	33
6 Right and Wrong Reasons to Risk	37
7 The Great Eight and the Foundation of Risk	41
8 On the Far Side of Every Faith-Filled Risk: Triumphant Love	47
Desiring God: Note on Resources	53

FOREWORD

David Platt

Retreat or risk? Throughout redemptive history, that question has confronted God's people. As John Piper references in the pages ahead, it was the decision facing the Israelites on a crucial day at Kadesh Barnea. Standing on the brink of the Promised Land, with the guarantee of God within their grasp, they ran from risk and chose to retreat. Instead of staking their lives on the faithfulness of God, they recoiled in fear. The cost was great, and the Lord left an entire generation to waste away in a wilderness until they died.

THE COMMISSION IS CLEAR

Fast-forward a few thousand years, and you come to the people of God standing in a similar moment. We live in a world where half the population is living on less than two dollars a day, and over a billion people dwell in desperate poverty. Such physical need is only surpassed by spiritual poverty. Billions of people are engrossed in the worship of false gods, and approximately two billion of those people are still unreached with the gospel, meaning that they have little chance of even

hearing about the sacrifice of Christ for their sins before they die. Most of the unreached live in hard-to-reach areas of the world that are hostile to Christians—areas of the world where our brothers and sisters are presently being persecuted, imprisoned, and killed.

Though the challenges facing the church are great, the commission Christ has given is clear: make disciples of all the nations. Spend your lives spreading the gospel of God for the glory of God to the ends of the earth. As you go, trust in his sovereign authority, depend on his indwelling presence, and experience his incomparable joy.

JESUS IS WORTH IT

As we stand at our Kadesh Barnea, we have a choice. We, too, can retreat into a wilderness of wasted opportunity. We can rest content in casual, convenient, cozy, comfortable Christian lives as we cling to the safety and security this world offers. We can coast through a cultural landscape marked by materialism, characterized by consumerism, and engulfed in individualism. We can assent to the spirit of this age and choose to spend our lives seeking worldly pleasures, acquiring worldly possessions, and pursuing worldly ambitions—all under the banner of cultural Christianity.

Or we can decide that Jesus is worth more than this. We can recognize that he has created us, saved us, and called us for

a much greater purpose than anything this world could ever offer us. We can die to ourselves, our hopes, our dreams, our ambitions, our priorities, and our plans. We can do all of this because we believe that the person and the plan of Christ bring reward that makes any risk more than worth it.

POWERED BY GOSPEL JOY

In Matthew 13:44 Jesus tells his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

I love this picture. Imagine walking in a field and stumbling upon a treasure that is more valuable than anything else you could work for or find in this life. It is more valuable than all you have now or will ever have in the future. You look around and notice that no one else realizes the treasure is here, so you cover it up quickly and walk away, pretending you haven’t seen anything. You go into town and begin to sell off all your possessions to have enough money to buy that field. The world thinks you’re crazy.

“What are you thinking?” your friends and family ask you. You tell them, “I’m buying that field over there.”

They look at you in disbelief. “That’s foolish,” they say. “Why are you giving away everything you have to buy that field?”

You respond, “I have a hunch,” and you smile to yourself

as you walk away. You smile because you know that in the end any risk that others perceive is nothing compared to the reward you will receive. So with joy—with joy!—you sell it all. Why? Because you have found something worth losing everything else for.

This is the picture of Jesus in the gospel. He is something—someone—worth losing everything for. When we really believe this, then risking everything we are and everything we have, to know and obey Christ is no longer a matter of sacrifice. It's just common sense. To let go of the pursuits, possessions, pleasures, safety, and security of this world in order to follow Jesus wherever he leads, no matter what it costs, is not sacrificial as much as it is smart. In the words of Jim Elliot, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

FEARLESS IN THE FACE OF RISK

I praise God for John Piper and the way he has shown me and countless others the supremacy of Christ. I was in college when I heard my first Piper sermon, entitled "Christ Died for God." I was compelled by a captivating, biblical vision of a God-centered God, and I began to realize in a fresh way that the ultimate reason for my existence is God's exaltation. Moreover, I began to recognize that my greatest joy is indeed found in God's greatest glory, and Christ is clearly a treasure worth

losing and letting go of everything for. This is a central theme (maybe *the* central theme) of Scripture and is the predominant truth that pervades John Piper's ministry, which is why this book by him on risk makes so much sense.

I pray that God will use it, along with a host of other things, to raise up an army of pastors, missionaries, church leaders, and church members who are fearless in the face of risk because they realize that in Christ, even death is reward. In view of God's great glory above us and in light of the world's great need around us, retreat is unquestionably wrong. For the good of our souls and for the glory of our Savior, risk is most assuredly right.

Chapter One

THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF LIFE

Almost everything I have to say is summed up in Paul's passionate words to the church in Philippi:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
(Phil. 1:20–21)

If you had asked Paul to tell you what the ultimate aim of life is—*his* life or *any* unwasted life—I think this is what he would have said. Honoring Christ, magnifying Christ, making much of Christ. That was the meaning of Paul's life. It should be the meaning of ours. And Paul prays it will be the meaning of his death as well. We live and we die to make much of Christ.

The universe was created for this—making much of Christ. Paul says as much in Colossians 1:16: “All things were created through him and *for* him.” *For* him. That is, for his

glory. For his admiration, esteem, wonder, praise, trust, obedience, allegiance, worship. This meaning of life is global. It embraces all the peoples of the world. Why did God call Paul and make him—and thousands after him—an emissary of the gospel to the nations? He answers, “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of his name* among all the nations” (Rom. 1:5). For the sake of Jesus’s name.

After Jesus had died and made an atonement for sins, God raised him from the dead and “highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). The reason God did this was the universal acclaim of Jesus Christ. He raised him “so that *at the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10). John Stott warns against the treasonous imperialisms of using world missions as a cloak for pursuing honor for our own nation or church or organization, or ourselves. Then he says stunningly: “Only one imperialism is Christian, however, and that is concern for His Imperial Majesty Jesus Christ, and for the glory of his empire or kingdom.”¹

This is what we live for, and die for: to make much of Jesus Christ and his glorious, universe-encompassing kingdom. The heart cry of our lives, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, is the glory of Jesus Christ so that *with full courage*

¹John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 53.

now as always Christ might be honored in our bodies, whether by life or by death.

There are a thousand ways to magnify Christ in life and death. None should be scorned. All are important. But none makes the worth of Christ shine more brightly than sacrificial love for other people in the name of Jesus. If Christ is so valuable that the hope of his immediate and eternal fellowship after death frees us from the self-serving fear of dying and enables us to lay down our lives for the good of others, such love magnifies the glory of Christ like nothing else in the world.

The Bible tells us that Jesus endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2)—the joy of being raised from the dead, returning to the glory of the Father, saving innumerable people from destruction, making the whole universe new, and being surrounded by countless worshipers forever. There never has been a greater act of love than that Jesus laid down his life to save sinners (John 15:13; Rom. 5:6-8). Therefore, the greatest act of love was enabled by hope of joy beyond the grave.

If Jesus was carried through the hour of death for the sake of others by hope of joy in the presence of God, we would be arrogant to presume we could be carried through death for others without such hope. The early Christians gave their property and their lives for sake of others because they knew

that on the other side of death Jesus would be their great reward. “You had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, *since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*” (Heb. 10:34).

Now we are ready to talk about risk.

Chapter Two

WHAT IS RISK?

If our single, all-embracing passion is to make much of Christ in life and death, and if the life that magnifies him most is the life of costly love, then life is risk, and risk is right. To run from it is to waste your life.

WHAT IS RISK?

I define risk very simply as an action that exposes you to the possibility of loss or injury. If you take a risk you can lose money, you can lose face, you can lose your health or even your life. And what's worse, if you take a risk, you may endanger other people and not just yourself. Their lives may be at stake also. Will a wise and loving person, then, ever take a risk? Is it wise to expose yourself to loss? Is it loving to endanger others? Is losing life the same as wasting it?

It depends. Of course you can throw your life away in a hundred sinful ways and die as a result. In that case, losing life and wasting it would be the same. But losing life is not always the same as wasting it. What if the circumstances are such that *not* taking a risk will result in loss and injury? It may not be

wise to play it safe. And what if a successful risk would bring great benefit to many people, and its failure would bring harm only to yourself? It may not be loving to choose comfort or security when something great may be achieved for the cause of Christ and for the good of others.

RISK IS WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF OUR FINITE LIVES

Why is there such a thing as risk? Because there is such a thing as ignorance. If there were no ignorance about the future, there would be no risk. Risk is possible because we don't know how things will turn out. This means that God can take no risks.¹ He knows the outcome of all his choices before they happen. This is what it means to be God over against all the gods of the nations (Isa. 41:23; 42:8–9; 44:6–8; 45:21; 46:8–11; 48:3). And since he knows the outcome of all his actions before they happen, he plans accordingly. His omniscience rules out the very possibility of taking risks.²

But not so with us. We are not God; we are ignorant. We

¹This view is clearly and consciously opposed to the view called “open theism,” which believes that God takes real risks in the sense that he does not know the outcome of many events that he sets in motion. This view is represented, for example, by John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); and Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), and is criticized effectively, I believe, by R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); and John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Kjoss Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

²See more on why God cannot be a risk taker in John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God*, 3rd ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012), 40–46.

don't know what will happen tomorrow. God does not tell us in detail what he intends to do tomorrow or five years from now. Evidently God intends for us to live and act in ignorance and in uncertainty about many of the outcomes of our actions.

He says to us, for example, in James 4:13–15:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

You don't know if your heart will stop before you finish reading this page. You don't know if some oncoming driver will swerve out of his lane and hit you head-on in the next week. You don't know if the food in the restaurant may have some deadly bacteria in it. You don't know if a stroke may paralyze you before the week is out, or if some man with a rifle will shoot you at the shopping center. We are not God. We do not know about tomorrow.

EXPLODING THE MYTH OF SAFETY

Therefore, risk is woven into the fabric of our finite lives. We cannot avoid risk even if we want to. Ignorance and uncertainty about tomorrow is our native air. All of our plans for tomorrow's activities can be shattered by a thousand unknowns

whether we stay at home under the covers or ride the freeways. One of my aims is to explode the myth of safety and to somehow deliver you from the enchantment of security. Because it's a mirage. It doesn't exist. Every direction you turn, there are unknowns and things beyond your control.

The futility of finding a risk-free place to stand has paralyzed many of us. I have tasted this in my own pastoral leadership. There are decisions to be made, but I can't see which decision is best. There are so many unknowns. The temptation is to run away—if not physically, emotionally. Just think about something else. Put it off. Procrastinate. Hope the problem goes away. But it doesn't. And our paralysis is serving no one. The paralyzing fear of making a decision serves no one. It is cowardly. Risk is the only way forward.

BONHOEFFER ON THE LOVELESSNESS OF INDECISION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer breathed the air of crisis most of his adult life. This would eventually make the issue of decisiveness a matter of life and death. And even before that moment it was an issue of love.

Everywhere Bonhoeffer looked in the Europe of 1934 he saw Christian indecisiveness. The “deutsche Christen,” the global ecumenical movement—everyone but Hitler. Nazism's stranglehold on the church in Germany was almost complete, and no one seemed willing to act.

Bonhoeffer and his friends soon would. A “confessing church” would emerge, struggling to be free from coercions of the Third Reich. A “Barmen Declaration” would be published. But for now Bonhoeffer pleaded for action.

On April 7, 1934, he wrote a letter to Henry Louis Henriod, the Swiss theologian who headed the ecumenical World Alliance. He pled for support for the pastors and Christians in Germany who knew (to their peril) their church was no longer a church. Here we learn a lesson about the perils of indecision. Bonhoeffer wrote:

A decision must be made at some point, and it's no good waiting indefinitely for a sign from heaven that will solve the difficulty without further trouble. Even the ecumenical movement has to make up its mind and is therefore subject to error, like everything human. But to procrastinate and prevaricate simply because you're afraid of erring, when others—I mean our brethren in Germany—must make infinitely more difficult decisions every day, seems to me almost to run counter to love. *To delay or fail to make decisions may be more sinful than to make wrong decisions out of faith and love.*³

That last sentence is worth a long consideration. Risk avoidance may be more sinful—more unloving—than taking the risk in faith and love and making a wrong decision. In my

³Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Nelson, 2010), 218; emphasis added.

ministry, I have often said after making a hard decision where both directions are painful, “This is why I love the gospel.” Doing nothing needs forgiveness as much as doing the best you can and erring.

There is sometimes a subtle selfishness behind our avoidance of risk taking. There is a hypocrisy that lets us take risks every day for *ourselves* but paralyzes us from taking risks for *others* on the Calvary road of love. We are deluded and think that such risk may jeopardize a security that in fact does not even exist. The way I hope to explode the myth of safety and to disenchant you with the mirage of security is simply to go to the Bible and show that it is right to risk for the cause of Christ. It is right to seek to make much of Christ by taking the risks of love.

A choice lies before you: **EITHER WASTE YOUR LIFE** *or* **LIVE WITH RISK.**

Either sit on the sidelines or get in the game. After all, life was no cakewalk for Jesus, and he didn't promise it would be any easier for his followers. So we shouldn't be surprised by resistance and persecution.

Yet most of us play it safe. We pursue comfort. We spend ourselves to get more stuff or be entertained.

We are all tempted by the idea of security, the possibility of a cozy Christianity with no hell at the end. But what kind of life is that really? It's a far cry from adventurous and abundant, from truly rich and really full, and it's certainly not the heights and the depths Jesus calls us to.

Discover in these pages a foundation for fearlessness. Hear God's promise to go with you into the unknown. And let *Risk Is Right* help you see the joys of a faith-filled and seriously rewarding life of Jesus-dependent abandon!



"I pray that God will use this book to raise up an army of pastors, missionaries, church leaders, and church members who are fearless in the face of risk."

DAVID PLATT, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Radical* and *Radical Together*

"This book is absolute dynamite. I plead with all my heart that you buy it, read it, and with God's help, live it out."

JONATHAN CARSWELL, Managing Director of 10ofThose

JOHN PIPER (DTheol, University of Munich) is teacher and founder of Desiring God and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary. He served for over 30 years as pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and is author of more than 50 books including *Desiring God*, *Don't Waste Your Life*, and *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian*.

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