



ENTHUSIAST!

finding a faith that fills

BOB WHITESEL

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To the Wesley scholars who have gone before me, delving into the smallest details of the lives of the remarkable men and women whose enthusiasm continues to impact a world in need.

To my co-fellows at the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College, my academic friends at Fuller Theological Seminary and Talbot School of Theology, and my colleagues at the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education, the Academy for Intercultural Church Research, the Society for Church Consulting, and The Great Commission Research Network.

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To Rebecca, the love of my life and the mother of our daughters. She exemplifies the spirit of Susanna Wesley, by tirelessly teaching and fostering a love of Christ in her children and her children's children.

And to my family, for the love and enthusiasm we share with one another and for Christ.



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FOREWORD

**JOHN WESLEY:
THE GREATEST WORLD CHANGER
SINCE THE APOSTLE PAUL**

John Wesley was the most influential Christian leader since the apostle Paul because he carried out the Great Commission in its entirety. When Wesley died in 1791, there were 243 Methodist churches in the United States. By the War of 1812, there were 5,000 Methodist churches. John Wesley not only preached the gospel to lost people but also raised up an army of circuit-riding preachers, each one of them planting some fifty to one hundred churches. Within one generation after the death of John Wesley, the Methodist Church became the largest Protestant movement in the world.

—Elmer L. Towns
co-founder and vice president of Liberty University,
dean of Liberty University School of Theology



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AN ENTHUSIAST AND WHY YOU SHOULD BE ONE TOO

Typically, an enthusiast is someone passionate about a sports team, a musical group, a hobby, or something of the like. The term *enthusiast* carries the idea of being devoted, passionate, and willing to tell others about the source of your enthusiasm.

For some, enthusiasm and Christianity do not mix. Yet the Bible is filled with passages about how a Christian's life should model devotion, passion, and a willingness to tell others about the source of that enthusiasm. Consider these examples:

As for you, Solomon, my son, acknowledge your father's God and serve him with enthusiastic devotion, because the LORD searches every mind and understands the motive behind every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you abandon him, he will reject you forever. (1 Chron. 28:9)

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When they enthusiastically sought God, he was found by them, and the LORD gave them peace on every side. (2 Chron. 15:15)

Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed:

Blessed is he who comes,
the king in God's name!
All's well in heaven!
Glory in the high places!
(Luke 19:37–38 MSG)

When the church in Jerusalem got wind of this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check on things. As soon as he arrived, he saw that God was behind and in it all. He threw himself in with them, got behind them, urging them to stay with it the rest of their lives. He was a good man that way, enthusiastic and confident in the Holy Spirit's ways. The community grew large and strong in the Master. (Acts 11:22–24 MSG)

Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord. (Rom. 12:11)

**HOW TO DISCOVER OR
REDISCOVER ENTHUSIASM**

Do you need to rekindle your enthusiasm for Christ or his church? Do you need to discover it for the first time?

Set aside fifteen minutes a day, and this devotional will show you biblical principles lived out in the lives of men and women who were called enthusiasts because of their devotion, passion, and willingness to tell others about Christ. You will discover how two burned-out pastors, wavering in their faith, blossomed into passionate spiritual leaders and evangelists: John and Charles Wesley. Labeled enthusiasts as an insult, the Wesleys embraced the term because the New Testament word that is translated "enthused" described a personal connection to a heavenly Father who, through his Spirit, came to dwell within his children (see John 1:14).

Each day you will learn biblical lessons about deepening your relationship with God; by saying no to sin, helping the needy, finding spiritual peace, developing authentic friendships, engaging in prayer activities, understanding heavenly assurance, overcoming trials, and developing good financial habits, you will learn how to be empowered by God to do all these things.

A REASONABLE ENTHUSIASM

Enthusiasm can be unreasonable if it means blind devotion or passion. John Wesley emphasized being authentically Spirit-filled (or *enthused*) would produce the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).¹

Such fruit-bearing enthusiasm brings together devotion, passion, and a willingness to tell others with a reasonableness in doing so. John Wesley became known as the “reasonable” enthusiast. He remarked if one reads the Bible, one will conclude the only crazy people are those who are not enthusiastic.²

This devotional book is titled *Enthusiast!* for several reasons: First, since the root word for *enthusiasm* combines the Greek words *en* (meaning within or in) and *theos* (God), it reminds us we must be filled with God’s Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:33). Second, a rational enthusiasm requires our passion and devotion to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22–23). Third, when the world mocks our passion with disparaging nicknames, we Christians must stand up for our passion for Christ and his church. Fourth, an enthusiast who is characterized by devotion, passion, and a willingness to tell others about the source of their enthusiasm, fulfills the command given to us by Christ (see Matt. 28:18–20).

Are you facing trials in your life? Would you like strength to persevere and joy to flourish in your spiritual journey?

INTRODUCTION

Do you seek a rational enthusiasm? Set aside fifteen minutes every day for the next six weeks and be immersed in the stirring stories of women and men who reclaimed a biblical enthusiasm that turned trials into triumphs.

THE LEGACY OF ENTHUSIASTS

The ministry of John and Charles Wesley gave rise to a great Wesleyan movement that swept across Great Britain and America. These enthusiasts, who eventually settled on the term *Methodists* to describe themselves, gave rise to denominations such as the United Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Church of God in Christ, the Free Methodist Church, the Freewill Baptist Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of Christ, The Foursquare Church, the Calvary Chapel Association of churches, the Association of Vineyard Churches, The Salvation Army, The Wesleyan Church, and many others.

Twenty-six percent of the Protestant church around the globe can be traced back to these “enthusiasts.”³ What could God do in the next century if we reclaimed their methods?

ENTHUSIAST!

In fact, the reader will find this book to be a daily method for unleashing a faith that fills. Daily biblical lessons can infuse your life with a Christ-centered passion that will grow even stronger when shared among friends.

AN AUTHOR'S HOPE

As I have penned over a dozen books, it has been personally fulfilling to write my first devotional on a topic the church needs to hear and apply. I hope readers will see that the term *enthusiast* may be one of the better ways to describe a person who has a Spirit-filled devotion, passion, and desire to share the good news.

It is, therefore, my hope that this journey into the life and lands of the enthusiasts will help Methodists, Wesleyans, and everyone who identifies with the Wesleys' method, to foster a relationship with God that is brimming with vitality, power, hope, and lifelong enthusiasm. It is also my hope each person who undertakes this devotional journey will, as John Wesley said, "Thus expect a daily growth in that pure and holy religion which the world always did, and always will, call enthusiasm."⁴

part 1

EMBRACING GOD'S PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

abraham and isaac
genesis 22

Discover how an enthusiastic life begins with abandoning yourself, allowing God to reshape your dreams into better ones, standing up against skeptics through the power of a group of friends, and focusing upon the needs of others.



SACRIFICING YOUR FUTURE UPON GOD'S ALTAR

Nothing may be quite as heart-wrenching as the death of a child. Though Rebecca and I have not experienced this, I imagine the worst case would be to watch it happen before my eyes. John Wesley, who would be called an enthusiast as well as “the most influential Christian leader since the apostle Paul,”¹ almost didn’t make it to adulthood.

Understanding the biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac provides a background (see Gen. 22:1–14). You may recall Michelangelo’s famous painting, which depicts not only Isaac’s bewilderment at the unfolding events, but also Abraham’s faith amid heartbreak. Soon after that moment, captured on canvas by Michelangelo, an angel and a replacement animal for sacrifice appeared. This event fostered faith and trust in both son and father. Commenting on these verses, John

Wesley wrote, "The more eminent the danger is . . . the more wonderful and the more welcome is the deliverance. . . . The best evidence of our fearing God is our being willing to honour him with that which is dearest to us, and to part with all to him, or for him."

Similar to the story of Isaac was the story of five-year-old John Wesley, whom his parents called Jacky. On a winter's day in 1709, the two-story parsonage of Rev. and Mrs. Samuel and Susanna Wesley was engulfed in flames. Jacky's siblings and parents had all escaped, including one-year-old Charles. As mother, father, and townspeople looked on, Jacky appeared in the second-floor window, flames leaping behind him.

The brick parsonage stood on the edge of Epworth, a small farming community in the rolling hills of England. Because of the wood floors and walls, the inferno spread quickly and prevented anyone from reentering the house. As the burning floors began to collapse, the five-year-old peered over the second-floor windowsill, most likely into the desperate eyes of his mother. No ladder or other means of reaching the boy was available.

I've stood at that very window in the now-rebuilt Wesley parsonage. Given Jacky's height as a five-year-old, it's likely he would have been visible only from the eyes upward. It must have been a dreadful experience for a mother to look into the eyes of one of her youngest children, helplessly trapped in an inferno with certain death awaiting. Having

read Susanna's letters about her robust prayer life, I can only imagine the fervency of the prayer this godly mother must have sent heavenward.

At once a man from the crowd ran forward and threw himself against the brick wall of the burning parsonage. He commanded another townsman to scamper up his shoulders. Straining upward with all his might, the second man reached young Jacky's outstretched arm, snatching him from the flames seconds before the fire engulfed the room.

It is clear to me this image was seared in Susanna's mind and heart. When Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son at God's command, the Lord provided a rescue. Once again salvation leapt forth from an unlikely source: two unnamed villagers whose identities have been lost to time.

As I study Susanna's life, I see this event had two remarkable impacts upon her.

LESSON ONE

God sometimes allows suffering
in order to teach a lesson.

Susanna realized God had something special in store for Jacky because of the experience God had put him through. Though she was always a devoted mother who allotted time

each day for each child, Susanna now chose to spend extra time each day with Jacky in lessons and Bible reading.

Little did Susanna realize Jacky would grow into one of the great intellectuals of his time. But God knew, and, prompted by a harrowing experience, Susanna would begin to impart to John the insights that would nurture this world-changer.

LESSON TWO

With God, the situation is never hopeless.

Just as the ram suddenly appeared as a substitute for Isaac in Genesis 22, rescue for young Jacky came through two men whose names are not recorded. How might history have been changed if those two men had not taken the initiative? Whether an unreserved townsman who served as a ladder or "a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush" (Gen. 22:13), we are reminded God often uses the mundane to make world-changing impact.



APPLICATION

For personal devotions, read and meditate on the following questions, noting your responses in a journal. **For group discussion**, see the Appendix.

Have there been trying times in your past, or even that you're going through today, in which you wondered why God would afflict you with such calamity? Could it be because God has a rescue planned and a story that will emerge to guide the rest of your life? Give God your dreams, fears, plans, and future. Seek his story for your life.

How have you seen God use common and unremarkable people to do great things? Perhaps you feel average, normal, the furthest thing from an enthusiast. But that doesn't mean God can't change the world through you. He can! But that common thing or act may not turn into a moment people remember or even recognize. Sharing Jesus with a neighbor or a stranger can change their life and the future of many. Don't live your life based on what others see as the fruit of your labor. Your heavenly Father sees your impact, if you are faithful.



NOTES

Introduction

1. John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit," *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 297.
2. John Wesley, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 50.
3. Geordan Hammond, email message to author, April 4, 2017.
4. John Wesley, 60.

Devotion 1

1. See the foreword by Elmer Towns.
2. John Wesley, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.ii.ii.xxiii.ii.html>.

Devotion 2

1. Matthew Arnold "Thyrsis," *Macmillan's Magazine*, ed. David Masson (Cambridge, London: MacMillan and Co., 1866), 449.
2. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 25, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 235.

Devotion 3

1. The methods described in detail along with their impact in Rebecca Lamar Harmon's *Susanna, Mother of the Wesleys* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968), 57–62.
2. *Ibid.*, 57.
3. Paraphrased by the author from John Wesley's questions found in "Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters," *The Works of*