

Culture Segment

TOPIC: God wants our desires

GUEST: A.J. Swoboda

TAPING:

***Studio Interview**

Month, DD, YYYY

0:00 am/pm

Studio J

AIRDATE:

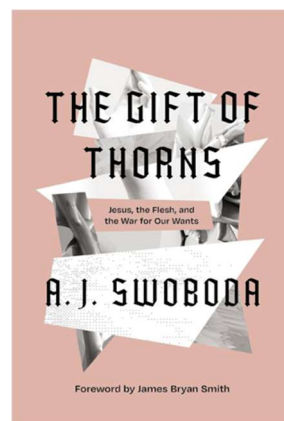
September 4, 2025

SHOW#: 918

Interview Direction:

- To start, AJ will explain what a “thorn” is and why they’re gifts.
- Then, we’ll explore what living with a sound theology of the flesh looks like and address the listener who may feel condemned.
- We’ll talk about our desires, when they don’t align with Jesus, when we don’t desire Jesus, and what we can do about that.
- AJ talks about hate in his book, and we’ll unpack what he means to close.

A.J’s Website: AJSwoboda.com



BOOK (This is a GOAA): *The Gift of Thorns: Jesus, the Flesh, and the War for Our Wants* (2024).

GUEST BIO — A.J. Swoboda:

Career:

- Associate professor of Bible and Theology at Bushnell University, a private Christian university in Eugene, OR
- Served as college pastor at University of Oregon for nearly 10 years
- Planted and pastored Theophilus, an urban church in Portland
- Leads a Doctor of Ministry program around Spiritual Formation and Soul Care at Friends University (Wichita, KS)
- Hosts the Slow Theology podcast with Dr. Nijay [KNEE-jay] Gupta
- Hosts Foursquare's Same Jesus podcast with Russell Joyce
- Writes the Low-Level Theologian Substack



Education:

- PhD from University of Birmingham (England)

Author:

- *Messy: God Likes it that Way* (2012)
- *Tongues and Trees: Towards a Pentecostal Ecological Theology* (2013)
- *Blood Cries Out: Pentecostals, Ecology, and the Groans of Creation* (editor, 2014)
- *A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension Between Belief and Experience* (2015)
- *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (with Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, 2014)
- *The Dusty Ones: Why Wandering Deepens Your Faith* (2016)
- *Scripting Pentecost: A Study of Pentecostals, Worship and Liturgy* (editor, 2019)
- *Redeeming How We Talk: Discover How Communication Fuels Our Growth, Shapes Our Relationships, and Changes Our Lives* (with Ken Wytsma, 2018)
- *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World* (2018)
- *After Doubt: How to Question Your Faith without Losing It* (2021)
- *A Teachable Spirit: The Virtue of Learning from Strangers, Enemies, and Absolutely Anyone* (April 29, 2025)
- *Slow Theology: Eight Practices for Resilient Faith in a Turbulent World (A Guide to Deep Faith in Our Busy Modern Lives)* (with Nijay Gupta, Sept 23, 2025)

Personal Life & Accomplishments:

- Lives and works on an urban farm with his wife Quinn and son Elliot in Eugene

BOOK: *The Gift of Thorns: Jesus, the Flesh, and the War for Our Wants* (2024).

WEBSITE: AJSwoboda.com

BACKGROUND:

- **Desire comes from either the flesh or the spirit.**

Don't despair when we don't *feel* desire for God. Desire is not the same as love.

- "[T]he flesh entices us into short-term enjoyment and relief that leads to long-term anxiety and death, while the Spirit invites us into painful faithfulness in the present leading to long-term life and peace" (p. 77-78).
- "By sheer grace, prodigal desires will come home from time to time. When they do, be present. Enjoy them. The shy gift of felt desire is beautiful, enlivening, and breathtaking even if it doesn't always show its face. But for most of us, there will be times when we don't have the same felt desire for God. ... In [those] shadows of desire, we need a resilient posture and a prayerful spirit. We'll need to surround ourselves with people who can guide, love, and support us toward God as desire has dissipated remembering that God desires us still in both experiences" (p. 96).
- "[A] changing desire is not a dying desire. ... Desires change. But, as Paul wrote, love remains (1 Cor. 13:8). A distinctive mark of Christian maturity is one's ability to continue following Jesus when our desires have abandoned us" (p. 96).
- "Sometimes we follow Jesus out of desire. Sometimes on duty" (p. 97).
- "Our love for God [must] run deeper than our attraction to God" (p. 108).

- **How should we think about the flesh?**

- It will pass away ... eventually: "The person regenerated by Jesus will have the flesh until resurrection. Until then, we cannot reform or change the flesh. The flesh doesn't repent. We cannot improve the flesh or make it better. Nor can it be cut out. The flesh won't submit" (p. 78).
- "Crucifying the flesh doesn't change it; it kills it. This is a lifelong process. ... We win by crucifying the flesh—an all-out, life-long, bloody assault on the desires of Satan that have corrupted our old selves. Christlikeness is found in the daily work of laying down our desires of the flesh for the sake of faithfulness to Jesus" (p. 78).
- "I've had to learn to stop condemning myself for having flesh" (p. 82-83).
- "A healthy theology of the flesh reminds us that marriage (or anything else) will not and cannot reform or evolve the flesh. No amount of prayer, counseling, spiritual direction, or fasting fixes it. But that's okay. God doesn't invite us to change our flesh. God invites us to see that we are no longer enslaved and controlled by our flesh. We are now freed to serve the desires of the Spirit" (p. 83).

- **How does God's provision and the cross fit into our desires?**

- **STORY**—Friend Tony began following Jesus as a gay man. Tony's still living in the flesh with its desires, and that thorn "has made him the most patient, gentle, loving follower of Jesus" (p. 86).
- "The cross is a sabbath for our desire" (p. 89).

- **How do we kill (fleshly) desires?**

Temptation alone is not a sin (p. 138).

- 1) Practice confession with one another (p. 140-144).

- 2) Asceticism

- "We too often believe the absence of desire to be [a] better option than the possibility of healed desire" (p. 147).

- Seen in how churches address porn: "The new goal becomes an absence of sexual desire rather than the cultivation of good and healthy sexual desire. Everything, here, is boiled down to little more than lust management. What results is a type of sexual anorexia. We kill what God wants sanctified" (p. 147).

- 3) Fill ourselves up with the right desires (p. 149).

- **How do we nurture right desires?**

- 1) "[P]lace ourselves willingly in a community where our desires and wants aren't given full reign. ... There is wisdom in being in a Jesus-seeking church in which I must submit myself to things I don't wish to hear and that I can't shuffle my way out of" (p. 168).

- 2) "We discipline our desires through the practice of simplicity (p. 169).

- 3) Read the Gospels (p. 169).

- **Loving and hating:**

- "God actually loves us too much to give us everything we want" (p. 127).

- "[W]e don't hate enough. We love everything and everyone the same. ... Subsume all loves (even the love of our 'loved ones') under and for a love for God. Only in loving God can we love anyone appropriately" (p. 191).

- **Don't kill desire completely:**

- "Satan found a way to weaponize our good desires against us [as curses]. Our good desires get us into a log of pain, trouble, and heartache. To survive, we start crucifying those good desires, thinking they are the problem. We often succeed. We kill the good desires within and lay them gently in the tomb, untouched, forgotten, lost. ... When our desires keep hurting us, we turn against ourselves and do away with them" (p. 200).

- **The function of delay in desire, and the hope to come:**

- Why Jesus doesn't come immediately: "The intentional delay of God accomplishes in us the cultivation of right desire that can only be fulfilled by his arrival. Delay is the birthplace of desire. And it is how God matures our desire. In the delay, our desire is being perfected, seasoned, prepared. Only mature desire can maturely receive" (p. 219-220).

- "What we wait for—the hope of glory that is to come—is long in coming. Waiting is often treacherous. And it both reveals our hearts intent and prepares it for what is to come" (p. 220).

- "Our desire ... will find what it has always sought. It still won't be satisfied. For the face it has always sought will take endless time to take in" (p.222).

STORIES/QUESTIONS:

- 1) How do we see our thorns as gifts?
- 2) Talk to the listener who may feel condemnation for having the flesh as a Christian. How do we develop a sound theology of the flesh in this already-but-not-yet space we inhabit?
- 3) How is the cross “a sabbath for our desires”? (p. 89)
- 4) How do we confront our sin and cultivate our desires?
- 5) How do we rightly order our desires with Christ at the center?
- 6) What do we do when we don’t *feel* the desire to follow Jesus? (p. 96)
- 7) How do we mature to be more childlike in telling Jesus our desires? (p. 104)
- 8) Apparently, we don’t hate enough. Unpack that statement, and the context necessary to understand God’s love, hate, and why we should be thankful He’s not an apathetic god (p. 191).

END (This is a GOAA):

The Gift of Thorns: Jesus, the Flesh, and the War for Our Wants (2024).

Go to Boundless.org, search for 918.

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