

40
DAYS
of
GOD'S
LOVE

By Mary & Friends

40 Days of God's Love

COPYRIGHT © 2022

Mary and Friends

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 2013 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked AMPC are taken from the Amplified® Bible Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org.) All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. (www.zondervan.com) The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Published by JesusOnline Ministries.

40 Days of God's Love is available in daily devotional format and may be downloaded free of charge on the JesusOnline “Forever Loved” website at JesusOnline.com/forever-loved or Forever-Loved.org. All resources may be used or translated for use in any manner deemed useful to the furtherance of God's kingdom.



**“May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God
and into the patience of Christ.”**
(2 Thessalonians 3:5)

**“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love
to one another and to all.”**
(1 Thessalonians 3:12)

40 Days of God's Love



Welcome to the Journey

The very fact that you are reading this speaks of your bravery. I applaud your willingness to explore God's heart.

If you, like so many, are searching for a way forward but have not considered Jesus Christ, thank you for your boldness and courage. This is a good place to start. If you, like so many Christians in this generation, are feeling that something is keeping you from experiencing life the way you sense God designed it to be lived, thank you for your humility and honesty. This is a good place for you to start as well. The Christian life is a journey of letting our assumptions about God be replaced with the truth of who He really is.

The do's and don'ts of religion (including Christianity) keep us thinking that we must do "good" things and avoid doing "bad" things to please God. The ways of thought that have worked themselves into us from childhood often tell us we must conform to certain rules to be accepted and loved.

But what does the Bible say? What is God's heart toward us? How does He feel about us? Who is God really?

The simple truth is: Jesus came to show us the Father and carry us back to Him. In Jesus there is no need of striving to attain right standing—no pressure to measure up to some illusive, holy standard—before we can be accepted. In Jesus separation does not exist. Nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

These devotionals were written for slow reading and deep thought. Wherever we are on this journey of seeing and believing God's love for us, we have only just begun. The renewing of our mind is a Spirit-led process, sometimes quick as a lightning bolt flashing across the night sky, sometimes gradual as a winding river wandering along to the sea. God's desire is that you come to rest in the joy-filled, peaceful assurance of knowing, deep down in the core of yourself, that you are welcomed and accepted, treasured and adored. His passion is that you be free to live life as the person He created you to be—knowing His heart for you—knowing His love for you.

May God be with you in this journey of understanding and transformation. May you come to know the vastness of our Father's goodness. May you feel the warmth of Jesus' embrace holding and including you. May the Holy Spirit open your eyes so that you come to see God as He really is—reaching out in love to you and all humanity.

Onward precious beloved. Welcome to *40 Days of God's Love*.

Day 1



Everlasting Lovingkindness

**“Give thanks to the God of gods, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
To Him who alone does great wonders, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
To Him who made the heavens with skill, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
To Him who spread out the earth above the waters, for His lovingkindness endures forever.
To Him who made the great lights, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
The sun to rule by day, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.
The moon and stars to rule by night, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.”
(Psalm 136:2–9, NASB)**

Do you ever wonder: “Who put the stars into place?” “Who made the sun, the moon and this earth we live on?” “Where did life come from?” “Who made me?” “Why am I here?”

Our answers to these types of questions are grounded in our foundational ideas about God. The God we believe in (or the view of no-God we hold) colors our perception of the world and profoundly affects our lives. We are like the deity or deities we hold in our mind. If we do not start in the right place—with God whose “lovingkindness is everlasting”—our answers to these questions will be distortions of the truth. And our lives will reflect those distortions.

Imagine yourself sitting down at a computer and beginning to write a story. But instead of your fingers being in the right place, suppose they are slightly off—one key to the left. From this wrong starting point, the whole story is nonsense. The first sentence reads, “Fis ua kiew.” What?

When we don’t start in the right place, we misunderstand the God of the universe and nothing makes sense. We may try desperately to make our lives work and be good people. Or we may give up trying to be good and hide our fears, hurts and disappointments behind distractions, addictions or hardened hearts.

Perhaps you believe in a collection of distant deities all needing to be appeased in various ways. Maybe you think of God as legalistic and strict, like a harsh judge eager to punish your disobedience. Perhaps you see God as holy and chronically dissatisfied with you because of your inability to measure up. Or maybe you have no idea of who God is or what He wants of you.

No wonder life doesn’t make sense. No wonder all our efforts to work our way back to God—through any number of different means—are fruitless. We’ve started at the wrong place, in “Fis ua kiew”—in a being or beings of our man-made, religious design.

But if you start in the right place—if you move your fingers to the proper place on the key-

board—the story makes sense. Your first sentence reads, “God is love.” God and love cannot be separated. Lovingkindness is the everlasting, unchanging nature of God.

Over and over again the psalmist repeats it—to ground us firmly in the understanding that the God of gods—the Lord of lords—is full of everlasting lovingkindness for His creation.

When you start with God and His everlasting lovingkindness, then creation, and your life as part of that creation, begins to become clear. God’s lovingkindness holds the secret to the why of the universe and the why of our existence. Creation itself flows out of the other-centered, self-giving love God shares.

From the beginning, God formed the universe with care and compassion. Out of His goodness, He created the heavens and the earth. He made the rocks and streams, the grass and trees, the fish and animals in lovingkindness.

And God didn’t just create the universe and then walk away. He didn’t just make you and then leave you to fend for yourself. He remains intimately involved and connected with His creation and with you.

Today God delights over you with care and compassion. You are a special and uniquely beautiful part of His creation. Out of His goodness, God made you to be included in His everlasting lovingkindness.

Ponder for a Moment

What does lovingkindness mean to you?

Where in creation do you see evidence of lovingkindness?

Picture the wonder of a flower, a forest, a sunset or the stars. How do you explain such beauty? How do you explain your appreciation of such exquisite design?

Day 2



You Are Precious to God

“You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they were written. The days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them. If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; when I awake, I am still with You.” (Psalm 139:13–18)

In this Psalm, written by David, we hear God’s caring heart. David knows he is a treasured masterpiece of the Master’s design. And because David knows, we can feel God’s goodness overflowing to us through this psalm. Can you imagine being treated with such adoring care?

David knows the reverence and wonder of God’s design of you and me. You are uniquely handcrafted by God. He tenderly knit you together in your mother’s womb and molded you according to His perfect design. He created you and gave you the gift of life. He gave you the gift of your own unique self.

Like an artist expertly blends the colors and carefully considers every detail of her painting, so God perfectly designed you. Just as an artist enjoys painting, so God enjoys making you. As an artist delights in the masterpiece she created, so God delights in you—His living masterpiece.

God didn’t just fashion you and then leave you to take care of yourself. His heart is forever for you. He cares about what happens to you every day of your life. He thinks precious, loving thoughts toward you—more in number than the sand on the seashore. He will never leave you nor abandon you. Even when you are unaware of His presence—even when you feel alone—God is with you.

David said, “When I awake, I am still with You.” When we “awake” from our wandering, sin and unbelief, we come to our senses and find that God is still there. No sin is too horrible, no religion too oppressive, no demonic power too strong to separate you from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ. In Christ you are forever cherished.

This is the truth, but it is OK if you do not believe it. God understands your heart. He knows how you were raised and the traumas and hurts that make it hard for you to believe that He cares. God knows your religious, cultural and family upbringing. He understands how your thoughts about Him do not line up with the truth of who He really is.

But David knew the truth of how he was carefully and lovingly made and treasured by God. He said, "Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well." It was that knowing that allowed David to speak as he did. Through his eyes we see God as David knew Him to be.

Over and over again in different ways, we need to learn of God's lovingkindness and let it silence the wrong thoughts we believe about Him ... and about ourselves. Repeatedly, in different settings, we need to see the truth and let it renew our minds. Over and over again, in different seasons of our lives, we need to experience His heart for us ... so we can come to know God as He really is and know ourselves as part of His treasured design.

Ponder for a Moment

David writes, "How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them. If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand."

What are some precious thoughts you hope, deep down in your heart, God is thinking about you?

How does it make you feel to realize God's thoughts towards you are actually far more precious and kind than you can even hope or imagine?

Day 3



God Is Love

“God is love.” (1 John 4:8, 16)

“God is love.”

But what is love?

The word for “love” used in this Scripture is translated *agape* in the original Greek. As distinct from the other Greek words often translated “love” in English, *agape*, is unselfish, self-giving, generous and kind. It is a pure love that gives expecting absolutely nothing in return. Its focus is on what is truly and deeply best for the intended receiver. *Agape* is gentle, compassionate and empathetic, yet at the same time violently opposed to anything and everything that harms the beloved. *Agape* is fiercely against sin because sin destroys us—the people of its affection.

This is who God is. He does not love us because we are a certain race, age, sex or educational level. He does not love us because we hold certain beliefs, are part of a certain religious group or behave in certain ways. He accepts us as we are and cares for us despite our faults. The horrible messes we make for ourselves do not put Him off. He loves us simply because *agape* is His nature.

“God is love.” It isn’t just that God loves or that God is loving. *Agape* has its origin and essence in God. God is *agape*.

And because God is *agape*, He is Three in One. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are three unique beings in complete agreement and union with each other. God lives together in community. He is, and always will be, a relational and loving God. Just like in a family, the Trinity’s love for each other and for creation is expressed through relationship. Self-giving, other-centered *agape* is the core of the Trinity.

Some religions have only one God who exists alone; others have many deities who are in constant conflict or competition. But the fellowship of the Trinity—the everlasting life of God—is one of mutual enjoyment and delight, mutual affection and adoration.

Think about it. How could a solitary being love? A deity who exists alone cannot love ... because love by definition requires something or someone to love. Love longs for and demands someone to give itself to. *Agape* shares itself in relationship.

From eternity past, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have been in community—in relationship. They have loved each other. If God were not the Trinity, He could not be love.

The Trinity shares a togetherness that is so pure, so peaceful, so full of joy and freedom that our minds cannot grasp it. God's shared life of love is the foundation of creation and of our ongoing part in it. The Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are passionate that you and I be drawn into Their life of love.

God the Father sent His Son. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Son came willingly to earth to show us the Father's heart and to make a way for us to live again in unity with God. Jesus said, "As the Father loved me, I also have loved you, abide in My love" (John 15:9). Today the Holy Spirit works in you and me to make God's love real to us so that we can experience it and share it with others. "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5).

The Father loves. Jesus loves. The Spirit loves. God is *agape*.

And He adores you exactly as you are right now. He doesn't just *agape* you the way you want to be. He doesn't just love the perfect-looking you that sits up straight in church. *Agape* is for you—the you that you wish didn't exist—struggling, fearful, unbelieving you. He loves the real, total package of you—just as you are right now without promise of change.

Ponder for a Moment

Is there some part of the way you view God that doesn't seem to fit with *agape*? If so, describe that view.

If *agape* were a picture, what would it look like to you? Describe that picture as you see yourself in it.

Imagine believing that God values, treasures and adores you, just as you are right now, without expectation of change. Describe what you feel.

Day 4



Created in God's Image

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.... Then God saw everything that He had made and indeed it was very good.” (Genesis 1:26–27, 31)

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit worked together to create humankind. God said, “Let Us make man *in Our image*....” We were created in the likeness of God. Animals weren’t created in God’s image. Angels weren’t created in God’s image. But we are!

We are made in the likeness of God. We are made to call the same things “good”—laughter, friendship, kindness. We are made to hate the same evils—cheating, hunger, violence. God is the creator of life; He made the universe and all it contains. And so we too create; we build houses, weave tapestries, paint pictures and plant gardens.

God made you and me in His image to enjoy the same life of fellowship the Trinity enjoys. We were created to live in relationship with God—in the Trinity’s shared enjoyment and delight, affection and adoration. We were fashioned by a God of love, in an act of love, to be recipients of love and to be streams of love flowing back to God and out to our fellow human beings. We were made for loving relationships with God, self, others and creation.

In order to live life as God intends, He fashioned us to be of three parts; we are *spirit*, *soul* and *body*. Our *spirit* is the resting place for God’s Spirit. Our *soul* defines our nature; it is our mind, will and emotions that make up our unique self. Our *body* is the physical covering for the spirit and soul within.

When spirit, soul and body are in agreement with God, the rulership He gave us to exercise on earth expresses His nature. God created humanity to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth.” He intends that we exercise the dominion He entrusted to us by living in agreement with Him—in His relational lovingkindness.

In God’s plan, our spirit becomes a resting place for His Spirit, and our mind, will, and emotions are transformed by His Spirit so that our body radiates the nature of God. In this way, the life and love of God is like a spring bubbling up within us, restoring our soul as it flows out of us as a refreshing stream.

After completing each day of creation, “God saw that it was *good*” (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21,

25). But on the day He created Adam, “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was *very good*.”

What did God see that caused Him to call creation, after it was completed with humanity, not just “*good*,” but “*very good*?” He saw someone like Himself with whom He could have a relationship. Now He could share Himself with beings who had the capacity to understand Him—to resonate with Him. He could give Himself to someone who could appreciate Him and who could, of their own choice, love Him back. And those people could love others and care for creation by sharing His love. Now *agape* could expand itself; God could give away His self-giving love.

God loves you with the very same everlasting love He shares within Himself. You were made to know and enjoy the same relationships of total honesty, adoration and delight the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share. Your soul needs laughter, friendship, kindness. You were designed to be cherished and valued.

And God cherishes and values you! God calls you “*very good*.” He made you to thrive in relationship with Him. You were made for life in God’s love.

Ponder for a Moment

What does it mean to you personally that you were made in God’s image?

How does it make you feel to be called the “*very good*” of God’s creation?

Day 5



Adam in the First Garden

“And they [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:8)

In the beginning, God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and supplied all their needs for life. Food and shelter were theirs in abundance. There was no sin—no separation from God. An atmosphere of peace, freedom and joyful belonging permeated all of life. The couple lived in unity with God, with themselves and with creation. In unbroken relationship, God walked with them.

Satan hated the life-giving, love-giving, fellowship the couple enjoyed with God, so he plotted to sever it.

God had warned Adam not to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That fruit wasn't good for people. So God set a boundary to keep His precious creation safe. Like a mother warning her child not to eat something poisonous, God warned Adam of the tragic outcome of eating the fruit. “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17).

But Satan tempted Eve. In the form of a serpent, he came to her: “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it *your eyes will be opened*, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Eve believed the serpent's lies and ate the fruit. She gave some to Adam and he ate too.

Immediately upon eating the fruit, the couple's relationship with God changed. Before they had known only good, but now their “opened” eyes—their newfound knowledge of good and evil—caused them to realize the evil they had done. Now they knew God was holy and good, and that He hated sin. So they hid from Him.

Yet, like a father looking for his lost children, God went searching for Adam and Eve. “Where are you?” He called.

Adam answered, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was *afraid* ...” (Genesis 3:9–10).

“*Afraid*”? Where did that fear come from? It didn't come from God. He had always provided for them; He delighted in walking with them in the cool of the garden. God had not changed; He had not rejected them.

He loved them before they ate the fruit and He loved them after they ate the fruit.

But the couple had sinned and their view of God was distorted. Their newly “opened” eyes, blinded by the knowledge of good and evil, couldn’t see God’s lovingkindness. Instead, fearing God’s punishment for their sin, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God ... and His love.

And in their fall, the entire human race fell too. Connection was broken. No longer could humanity live in caring, compassionate, life-giving relationship with God, themselves and creation.

For thousands of years, throughout Old Testament times, God would be with His people as they struggled to find a way back to the distant and punishing God they saw with their “opened” eyes. Even though they were oblivious to His true nature, God loved them and longed to be with them. So like a kind father might care for his disabled child, God cared for them in a way they could accept. He gave them good laws to follow ... but they couldn’t obey. He sustained them ... but they failed to see Him as their provider.

Yet, through it all, the Father had a plan of redemption. When the time was right, through His Son, He would make a way to repair our broken relationship so we could live again in His love.

Ponder for a Moment

What do you imagine Adam and Eve felt and experienced in the Garden before the fall?

Are you willing to consider the possibility that, even if you have been a Christian for a long time, you might not be seeing God as He really is?

In what ways might you personally be hiding from God?

Day 6



God Loved the World ... and Gave His Son

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

God longs to be with us. His heart desires intimacy. He wants us to live in the wholeness and fulfillment that life with Him provides. But, we as human beings couldn't repair the broken relationship. We couldn't work our way back. God had to do it; He made a way to bring us back into the life of love for which we were created.

God the Father loves the world. He doesn't just love a perfect world; He loves the real world. He cherished the world as He created it. He cherished the world as it existed 2,000 years ago. And He cherishes the world today despite its pollution and disease, famines and wars and all forms of hatred and denial of Him. The Father showed His passion for the world by planning a way for us—as real, messed-up people in a real, messed-up world—to enter into His life.

The Father didn't leave the working out of His plan to the human race to accomplish. He didn't lower a ladder into the pit we were in and shout down, “I want you with Me. Here are the steps to follow: Obey these commands. Pray these prayers. Climb the rungs. I'm waiting in heaven for you. Come on. You can do it.” No. God didn't do that. We can't save ourselves. Climbing religious ladders doesn't work. (The Pharisees climbed the ladder they had built for themselves, but the top of that ladder ended in death-producing religious pride, not in life-giving relationship with God.)

God the Father loved the world so much that He gave His only Son; Jesus willingly stepped down into the sin and confusion of this world—into the mess of our humanity—to save us. God the Father gave God the Son in human form to accomplish for us what only God could accomplish. As a man, Jesus entered our world. He joined Himself to our blind, diseased, sinful human flesh.

God the Son left the absolute perfection of heaven and stepped down the ladder into our mess and confusion. As a man, Jesus took the sin of the world—the sin of every person who will ever live—your sin and mine—upon Himself. In the blindness of our fallen nature, God the Son became one with us. In unity with us, He carried our sins to the cross and died the death our sin deserved.

And God's goodness didn't stop there. As one with us, Jesus carried us up the ladder that we couldn't climb. He took us from the pit of our depravity, held us close and carried us up the ladder into the eternal life of God. In Christ we enter into the relationship Jesus shares with His Father. Jesus is the only way we can live the life the Father planned for us from the beginning of creation.

Who can fathom the depths of humanity's sin and the price Jesus paid to rid us of it? Who can fathom the height to which Jesus lifted humanity in bringing us home to life in God's love?

Jesus is the way of salvation! He is the way of eternal life! Believing in Jesus and what He has accomplished sets us free from ceaseless striving to make ourselves acceptable. In Christ, we are free to live in the loving relationships with God and others that our soul craves.

Christianity was never meant to be a religion with traditions and laws to follow. Christianity is knowing Christ. It is believing in Him and being connected to the reality of what He has accomplished. Christianity is living in relationship with God—in everlasting life.

There are no pre-qualifying conditions for this life: nothing you have done or believed in the past excludes you. God longs to share Himself with you. With open arms, He welcomes all who come.

Ponder for a Moment

What are the deepest desires of your heart?

What steps might you have attempted in order to satisfy those desires?

Sit for a while and reflect on the picture of Jesus carrying you up the ladder into eternal life in the love of God. Record your thoughts, images or feelings.

Day 7



God Really Is Love

“God is love.” (1 John 4:8, 16)

We had this verse a few days ago, but since it is twice repeated in Scripture, it seemed good to repeat it here as well.

How did I come to write *40 Days of God's Love*? How did I begin to realize God was not like I had grown up thinking that He was?

Let me tell you my story.

I grew up in a Christian home. In Sunday school we sang, “Jesus *loves* me this I know for the Bible tells me so.” When I was 16, I accepted Jesus into my heart. I believed “For God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). On some level I knew that God loved me. But I thought He somehow loved me less when I did “bad” things and more when I did “good” things.

So I tried to do more and more “good” things. I earned a Ph. D. in Developmental Psychology with the intent of helping poor, forgotten children. My hope was that my husband (a pediatrician) and I, together with our children, could establish Christian orphanages in developing countries. I wanted to share Jesus with others.

But just after our fourth child was born, at age 32, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. I couldn't walk in a straight line. My whole body felt weak and tingly. My eyes wouldn't focus. All my plans of helping orphans faded. I couldn't even care for our own children. My sister and her family moved from 2,000 miles away to help us. Day after day I lay on the couch trying to be strong and hide my tears. What was happening to me? “God, You said, ‘All things work together for good to those who love you....’ God, you promised! But this isn't good!”

This time in my life was horribly difficult, not only because of the physical symptoms, but because of my distorted view of God. I felt deserving of love only as I did good things and I couldn't *do* anything.

Month after month as I lay on the couch, feeling worthless and unloved, there grew in me a desperate longing to know God. I didn't understand the longing. I thought I knew God; I had accepted Christ, gone to church and lived a moral “Christian” life. But the desire grew and grew. Like a person dying of thirst in the desert craves water, I had to *know* God.

Then one night, about three years after the diagnosis, I went to hear a guest speaker at church.

After the service I made my way to the front. “What do you want?” the visiting pastor asked me. And I sobbed out, “I just want God.”

“Lift up your hands and say I surrender all,” he said. A huge resistance came over me. “What about my family?” I thought. “What about the ‘good’ I want to do?” But so much had been stripped away already. So I lifted up my hands and said, “I surrender all.”

In that moment, from the cross at the front of the church—from the very center where the horizontal and vertical beams meet—pure love cascaded down upon me. It came in drops of liquid light that moved in flowing waves. I couldn't stand up. As I lay on the floor, wave after wave of love poured down directly into my heart. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move.

For hours I lay there. Pure love just kept coming. I wasn't reprimanded for past failings. I wasn't healed from Multiple Sclerosis. I wasn't given direction about something “good” to do. I'd said, “I just want God” and I got love.

That night 25 years ago changed my life in ways too deep for words. “God is love.” He doesn't love me because I am a *human doing*; He loves me because I am a *human being*. He loves me when I am sick. He loves me when I can't do anything. He loves me in my partial belief. He love(s) me when I sin.

Ponder for a Moment

In what ways might you be thinking that God's love for you is somehow related to what you do or don't do?

Describe an instance in your life when you knew you were loved.

Day 8



Love in Our Language

“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (John 1:18)

In heaven, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit live together in perfect harmony. The Trinity desires that this same perfect togetherness—this same life in the love of God—be known to each and every one of us.

But how could people understand this? How could we begin to comprehend God’s heavenly love? How could we know His feelings toward us? How could God communicate Himself to us? After the fall, people were cut off from God; their blind eyes couldn’t see Him as He really was.

Imagine yourself watching an ant colony. The ants scurry around unaware of your presence. Some are searching for food. Others are digging a nest. Then you notice that a nearby stream is flooding and the colony is in danger of being destroyed. You see a better nesting site with abundant food just a few paces up the hill and out of danger from the waters. So you call down to the ants, “Run to higher ground. Come live in a safe place.” But they continue working on the old nesting site. You bend down and try to redirect their path with a stick. But the ants swarm about in confusion as if you are trying to hurt them.

What can you do to help them? What if you became an ant yourself and communicated with them in a way they understood?

In this sense, God the Son willingly became an ant for us.

In Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Jesus is the Word; He is the essence of communication. And what is He communicating? What is Jesus expressing?

Jesus is expressing God, who is love. As a man with a nature and feelings like ours, Jesus cared for people with loving-kindness expressed in actions and words we can understand. The Son of God came to share God with us in tangible, human ways we can see, feel and relate to.

In Jesus’ life on earth, He communicated to us who God the Father really is. Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus as being “the brightness of His [the Father’s] glory and the expressed image of His person.” When you see Jesus, you are seeing God in human form. The actions and words that pour forth from Jesus show us the Father’s heart.

In Jesus, we see God walking around in the time and space of earth; we see God as Someone we can relate to. He is not angry at us. He is not waiting to punish us for our failures or unbelief. He does not hold Himself apart as holy or superior. Rather, He is welcoming to those rejected by society and actually enjoys being with common people. He is up-close, personal and intimately concerned with your physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

In Christ the God we perceived as powerful and punishing, high and holy, became a helpless baby born to an unwed mother in a filthy animal shed. As a man, Jesus reached out to the poor, the sick and those shunned by society. He befriended prostitutes and adulterers. He welcomed little children. He turned aside to talk to tax collectors, thieves and those crazed by demons. And to the scribes and Pharisees who thought they understood God, He spoke words of truth that cut to the heart and showed them how lost they too really were ... so they also could be made whole.

With the purpose of bringing God's life to all, Jesus showed us the greatest love the world will ever know. The "friend of sinners" (Luke 7:34) died on the cross for us.

This is God in our language; this is love in a language you and I can understand.

Ponder for a Moment

Why do you think Jesus was willing to come to earth as a man?

How would you communicate to someone who didn't understand your language that you valued and treasured them?

Day 9



The Compassion of Christ

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with *compassion* for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” (Matthew 9:35–36)

When we see Jesus going about His life on earth, we see the Father’s *compassion*. Jesus said, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son does in like manner” (John 5:19). When we see Jesus, we see God dressed in the flesh and blood of a man; we see love flowing out of a human like ourselves.

The miracles Jesus did demonstrate the amazing power of God. Spectacular events—like opening blind eyes, healing lepers and raising the dead—are eye-catching. But Jesus didn’t do miracles to attract attention or draw crowds. *Compassion* compelled Jesus to act as He did. Behind every miracle, sensational as it may have been, was the quiet, steadfast, uncompromising, unconditional love of God.

One day a crowd was following Jesus as He walked to Jericho. Two poor, blind beggars were sitting in the dust beside the road. When they heard that Jesus was coming, they began calling out “Have mercy on us.” Those in the crowd rebuked them. They felt Jesus had more important things to do than pay attention to these worthless men.

But still the men cried out. “Have mercy on us O Lord.” And Jesus’ heart of mercy went out to them. He stopped and bent down.

“‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, that our eyes may be opened.’ So Jesus had *compassion* and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him” (Matthew 20:32–34).

The blind beggars weren’t made to see in a blast of holy lightening from heaven. They received their sight when Jesus disregarded the crowd’s rebuke, paused in His journey, stooped down beside the dusty road and touched their blind eyes.

Feel the compassion behind that touch.

On another occasion, Jesus was preaching and casting out demons when a man with leprosy came to Him. In Jesus’ day lepers were outcast from families and society. People feared to touch or associate with them for fear of getting the flesh-eating disease.

“A leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, ‘If You are willing, you can make me clean.’ Then Jesus, moved with *compassion*, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed.’ As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him” (Mark 1:40–42).

Leprosy didn't stop the love of God. Jesus stretched out His hand.

Feel the compassion behind that touch.

Yet another time, Jesus and some of His disciples were entering a city when a funeral procession was leaving through the gate. The dead man was the only son of a widow. Without a husband or a son, women in that culture had no respect or means of support. It was like the woman's life too was ending with the death of her treasured only son. He had been everything to her and he was gone. And so she wept. Jesus saw the woman's deep pain and His heart went out to her.

“When the Lord saw her, He had *compassion* on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then He came and touched the coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ So he who was dead sat up and began to speak” (Luke 7:13–15).

Jesus felt the widow's grief. God knew her pain. His only Son too would die. And so, God reached down through Jesus' hands.

Feel the compassion behind that touch.

Ponder for a Moment

Pretend you have no preconceived ideas about God and you are seeing Him for the first time in these events. Describe God as you see Him in these situations.

Just as it was over 2,000 years ago, Jesus' touch of compassion is here for you now. What do you need compassion for today?

Day 10



Desired with Lovingkindness

“The LORD has appeared of old to me saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.’” (Jeremiah 31:3)

With lovingkindness God draws us to Himself. As amazing as it sounds, God who created the universe wants to be with you. Regardless of your position in life, your religion or your sins, you—exactly as you are right now—are cherished by God.

You are not a project to God. His goal is not to have you act certain ways or believe certain doctrines. God doesn’t just love you and put up with you; He actually likes you and delights in being with you.

Each member of the Trinity works together, in love, to draw us into love.

God the Father had a plan to bring us back into His family. That plan involved sending His Son. “In this the *love* of God was manifest toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him” (1 John 4:9).

God the Son came to earth as fully God and fully man to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus stepped down from heaven and took our sin upon Himself. Then He died on the cross to free us forever from that sin. Jesus said, “Greater *love* has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Today God the Spirit works in you and me to reveal the Son’s complete accomplishment of the Father’s plan. The Holy Spirit wants you to know that Jesus has done everything required to bring you back into unity with God. He makes *agape* love real in living experience. “The *love* of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5).

Deep in the core of each of us is a desperate longing to be loved. Our souls were created to be adored and treasured in intimate, honest relationships. God designed the human race to grow and flourish in union with Him. Like two magnets when they are properly aligned attract each other, God’s love pulls us in and holds us close in life-giving, soul-satisfying union.

But, if we are blind to God’s lovingkindness, we will resist Him. No one wants to be with someone who they think is aloof and distant or demanding and fault-finding. We avoid such people. And if we wrongly believe God to be this way, we will avoid Him too.

Like two magnets when they are misaligned push each other apart, our misunderstanding of God keeps us from Him.

But in Jesus, we hear God welcoming us. Standing on a hill above the holy city, Jesus cried out, "Oh Jerusalem.... How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37).

Can you hear the passion in His voice? Can you feel His longing? Think of a mother hen spreading her wings wide to cover and protect her brood of little chicks. Jesus doesn't want you trying to survive on your own. He wants you coming to Him, resting in the security and strength of His arms and knowing that you are accepted.

Jesus doesn't point accusing fingers. He doesn't clench angry fists. His arms are not folded tight across His chest; they are spread wide in welcome. He wants you.

Wherever you are today, God is calling you. "Come to Me. Lay down the burden of your do's and don'ts. Lay down your efforts to make yourself acceptable. Give up the hurtful, untrue thoughts you hold about yourself and about Me. Please, I'm here for you. I desire you. Come and rest in My love."

Ponder for a Moment

What do you feel when you hear God's words, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you"?

How might your life have been different if you had known from early on that you were loved and valued, treasured and adored?

How might your life be different going forward if you embrace the truth of God's love for you?

Day 11



Change Your Mind

“Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4)

“The *goodness* of God leads you to repentance.” Another translation reads: “God’s *kindness* leads you toward repentance” (NIV). God’s nature of lovingkindness makes a way for repentance.

But what is repentance? What is it that knowing God’s goodness and kindness leads us toward?

Repentance does not mean beating yourself up and feeling guilty because you have done something wrong. It is not confessing your sins to a priest or kneeling in guilt-ridden prayer. Repentance may conjure up images of an angry father shouting, “Say you are sorry ... or else,” but this image springs from an incorrect understanding of repentance ... and of God.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanola*. *Metanola* refers to a change of mind from confusion to clarity. Repentance indicates a radical reorientation—a paradigm shift—in the way we think of God. It implies a true change of heart resulting in a wiser view.

John the Baptist bridged the gap between the law-based system of the Old Testament—the “Old Covenant”—and the grace-based system of the New Testament—the “New Covenant.” He came preaching, “a baptism of *repentance* for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3). God was about to show humanity His stunning goodness, and a completely new mindset was necessary to grasp it.

John announced Jesus’ arrival, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). He was saying, “Change your mind. God in heaven is drawing near. Get ready to know God as you have not known Him before.”

Seeing God’s kindness in Jesus Christ changes our mind about who God is ... and about who we are. It is the goodness of God that leads us to repentance.

How did we get into the position of seeing God incorrectly in the first place? Why is it so difficult for us to understand God is *agape*?

Our problem is with the “opened” eyes we inherited when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Before the fall, the first couple had only known God’s goodness, acceptance and care for them. But after eating the forbidden fruit, their diseased eyes saw life through the veil good and evil; they saw that God was good, pure and right ... and they were

not. They had done evil and holy God hated evil.

In their darkened minds, the only way back was to try and win God's acceptance by following rules to make themselves good. But even when God Himself gave His laws to follow (the Ten Commandments), people couldn't obey; the law-based system didn't work.

Throughout the ages since the fall, people have used various religions (including Christianity), each with its own set of laws and moral codes, to get us back to the God we see with our "opened" eyes.

But God wants us to see Him as He really is: holy and hating sin, but loving us in spite of it.

And so, we are called to repent—to change our minds about Him—to see the goodness of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

When you know God is good, there is no need to hide from Him. In Christ, you do not need to fear that God will abandon you because of your sins. You do not have to punish yourself or try in your own strength to fix the bad side of yourself. You need not live with the stress and anxiety of trying to be "good" enough to satisfy your mind's warped view of God.

Truly, "the goodness of God leads you to repentance." Jesus came to open our eyes to who God really is ... so our minds would be changed and we could live in the freedom of knowing His love.

Ponder for a Moment

Regardless of your religious affiliation or lack thereof, in what ways might you be relying on good works or obedience to laws to make yourself right?

Consider how God may be calling you to repentance, not so much for moral failure or breaking the law, but for a change of mind in the way you think of Him.

Day 12



The Father's Embrace

“But when he [the prodigal son] was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” (Luke 15:20–24)

Stories have a way of sneaking past our defenses. We hear the story, something within us resonates with it, and then we realize it is speaking to us. Jesus told this story to open our eyes to the truth of how our Father feels about us.

A father had two sons. The older son worked hard on his father’s farm and followed the rules. The younger son did not. He wanted to do his own thing. So he asked his father for his inheritance, went to a far-away place and squandered all that his father had given him. Until ... he ended up feeding pigs and eating their food to stay alive.

Then the prodigal son came to his senses and realized that even his father’s servants were better off than he. So he decided to go home. Along the way, he thought of what he might say to appease his father. He would admit his sin. He would forfeit his sonship. He would ask only to be a servant in his father’s house.

As the son neared home, the father saw him coming! He ran to meet his son, flung his arms around him and kissed him. Can you see the father running on his tottery, old legs? Can you see the joyful tears streaming down his cheeks?

The father didn’t think about what his son had done; that the money was squandered, that his heart had been torn with grief, that the prodigal had sinned. The father didn’t bargain with his son: “You are welcomed home if...” He was simply overjoyed at his return. And so he had the servants bring fine clothes to replace his son’s tattered rags. This was cause for celebration. “*My son* was dead and is alive again.”

“*My son.*” Can you hear the father’s adoration? “My precious son is alive!” Relationship with a lost family is restored!

The older, responsible son was working in his father’s fields. But when he arrived home and heard that a party was being given for his younger brother, he was mad. The thought of welcoming home this sinner, this failure, this lazy good-for-nothing made him angry. For all these years,

he had done right. It was he who deserved a party.

The father reassured his older son of his position in the family and invited him to join the celebration. Again his words are laced with love. “Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

But the older son viewed his father’s actions toward his brother with disdain. His father’s heartwarming welcome of this prodigal wasn’t fair. His sinful, lazy brother had done nothing to earn such treatment. He was wiser than such nonsense. He was better than that—above forgiveness, above mercy, above his father’s grace, above the joy of reunion.

The question is not: Does the father love his sons? Clearly he loves both.

The critical question is: Will the sons accept their father’s undeserved, unconditional love?

You and I, along with every human being on the planet, are cherished by God. But we each have a choice as to how we respond. That choice doesn’t affect the Father’s love for us, but it does have a monumental impact on our lives.

Ponder for a Moment

Where are you in this story? Which son are you? In what ways might you be a combination of the two?

Think of a time when someone was overjoyed to see you. What did their joy tell you about how they felt about you?

Day 13



God Loves Us as Sinners

“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

In this verse we see the essence of God’s heart toward us. He is not filled with wrath and anger. His thoughts toward us are not about judgment or punishment. His heart is, and always has been, filled with love for us.

In the Old Testament we often read of the wrath and judgment of God. People were punished for their sins. But even before He sent His Son, we see that the Father’s kindness and mercy trump His anger. Scripture tells us, “With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you” (Isaiah 54:8).

Actually, God’s wrath is as much a part of His love as are mercy and forgiveness. God’s love for us is demonstrated in His fierce wrath toward anything that would harm us. God hates sin because it damages you and me and He can’t stand that. The full force of His anger is directed against sin because it hurts us—the “very good” of His creation—the masterpieces of His design. Regardless of the cost—regardless of the sacrifice—He will fight to rid us of sin and death.

But what is sin? When Jesus died for our sins, what did He die for?

The Greek word for sin is *hamartia*. *Hamartia* means missing the true goal of life. All of us sin, not just in a moral or legal sense, but by missing the mark of living as God designed. When we consider our sin, we usually think of things we know we have done wrong or are doing wrong. But sin goes deeper than that. *Hamartia* encompasses ways of thinking, feeling and acting that we don’t even know about that block us from living in the relationship with God for which we were created.

Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus died to free us of the sin keeping us from the Father and preventing us from being the people He created us to be. As the sinless Son of Man, the Son of God took our sin upon Himself and paid the full penalty for it. Jesus took the wrath of God our sins deserved; He took the separation they required.

Hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me” (Matthew 27:46). And then He descended into hell—the hell we deserved for our sin but, in Christ, will never hold us captive.

In His death, Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the Old Covenant law so that we sinners could know the love of God. In Christ, the Father doesn’t remember your sins. He said, “Their

sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12). In Christ, God sees you washed clean in the blood of His Son.

But no matter where we are in life, Satan, the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10), will pester us with thoughts to keep us from life in the fullness of God’s love. He will try to convince us that we are not “good” enough for God. We may be tempted to think God is mad at us in some way. We may fear that our trials are punishment for our sin.

Many of us try so hard to pull ourselves up to the level of holiness we think God desires. We work tirelessly to leave our sinful humanity behind. Like modern-day Pharisees, we use religion (including Christianity) to try to improve ourselves.

You may never be the person you want to be, but that is OK. The Father, Son and Spirit welcome real people like you and me—with sins we can’t seem to overcome. God loves *you* as are *you* are. He sent His Son to restore you to the relationship with God for which you were designed.

Ponder for a Moment

Have you sinned in some way that you feel excludes you from God’s love? If so, Explain.

What conditions might you have placed on God’s unconditional love?

What does this passage tell you about how God actually sees you?

Day 14



Eternal Life in Eternal Love

“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:3)

Eternal life is not just going to heaven when you die. It is not a one-time gift God gives to you and then He walks away. Eternal life is not a destination to be reached; it is a relationship to be enjoyed. Eternal life is you sharing yourself with God and God sharing Himself with you. It is living as part of the Trinity’s mutual love and goodness. Eternal life is knowing God.

The Greek word for know is *ginosko*. *Ginosko* does not refer to a learning of facts like one might memorize important dates in history or learn about key events in someone’s life. *Ginosko* means to be connected intimately in experience, like two people come to know each other in marriage. *Ginosko* implies a deep, honest, relational knowing of the heart.

There is a chasm of difference between knowing about someone and actually knowing someone *in experience*.

A huge gap exists between *knowing about* God and actually *knowing* God. We can correctly define God as all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere-present—even as loving. These facts are true, but knowing the facts is not the same as knowing Him. Our spiritual journeys can start as intellectual pursuits, but they won’t find fulfillment there. Eternal life cannot be reduced to truths we learn in a Bible study or by reading Scripture.

All too often, honest, searching people give up on God because religion tells them *about* God, but discourages them from *knowing and experiencing* Him. Christianity wasn’t meant to be a religion. It wasn’t meant to be reduced to a set of theological truths. Christianity is knowing Jesus—God made a man you can relate to—in an ongoing, relational way, as you know a spouse or a best friend.

But, how do you come to know God?

Relationships don’t happen all at once. They begin gradually and grow over time.

The Holy Spirit helps make the truth of the Father and the Son a living reality in our lives. He uses our life experiences, character flaws and sins to help us see that God accepts us unconditionally. He reveals God to us through Scripture, answered prayer, dreams, the actions of others ... the simple beauty of a flower, a forest or a sunset. The Holy Spirit is wonderfully creative in the ways He opens our eyes and encourages us to trust in Jesus.

Our only part is to come to Jesus. Nothing else is required. He accepts us as the fearful, skeptical, sinful, needy people, we really are. Jesus said, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37).

God created each one of us for eternal life; we are meant to know Him. Without Him we are incomplete. Deep in the soul of every man, woman and child is the need to be appreciated, valued and loved. This is the need God wants to satisfy. With heartfelt longing the Trinity desire you.

However, God gives us free choice. He won't force us into a relationship with Him—into eternal life. He won't force us ... because love, by its very nature, can't be forced. Love can only be given and received by choice. Think of a young man who loves a certain woman. He wants to be with her. He lavishes her with gifts that he wants her to enjoy. He delights in her and he wants her to feel the same about him. But the young woman doesn't have to accept his love. Mutual loving relationship is only possible where there is freedom to choose. Our participation is voluntary, not mandatory.

The passion of the Trinity for us is more than we can fathom. Jesus made the greatest sacrifice for you. Nothing brings heaven greater joy than that you choose Him.

Ponder for a Moment

If you desire to have a relationship with Jesus, sincerely say these words, or something similar, to Him.

Dear Jesus, You are the Son of God. You died on the cross for my sins. You love me just as I am right now.

Jesus, I welcome You. Be with me in the ups and downs of life. Teach me Your ways and be Lord of my life.

Thank You Jesus for coming to live in my heart and welcoming me into eternal life with You. Open my eyes and help me to see You as You really are. I want to know You more.

Day 15



Commanded to Love ... But How?

“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him and saying, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:35–39)

Jesus summed up the most important commands in the Old Covenant by pointing to the importance of love. When asked by a Pharisee about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus responded, “You shall love the LORD your God....” and, “You shall love your neighbor....”

Both the Old and New Covenant emphasize that love is to be our highest calling.

The Apostle John wrote, “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11). He said, “And this is His commandment that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment” (1 John 3:23). His admonition was, “If God so loved us, we also *ought* to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Corinthians 16:14). He encouraged the Ephesians, “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children and *walk in love*, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us” (Ephesians 5:1–2). And to the Colossians Paul said, “But above all these things *put on love*, which is the bond of perfection” (Colossians 3:14).

But how do we do the *ought* John spoke of? How do we *walk in love* or *put on love* as Paul encouraged? If we think of these New Testament scriptures as something we are to try in our own strength to do—as commands to be followed in the Old Covenant way—they become impossible to obey.

And to make their impossibility blatantly clear, Jesus raised the bar on love. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemy, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44). How can we love like that?

God is love and we were created in His image—to be like Him—to be part of His family and share *agape*.

Jesus came to show people what agape looks like in a human form, but His intent was never that we try to copy His actions by designing our own ways to help ourselves become more Christlike.

Jesus came as the living embodiment of love so we could know and believe the love that God has for us. Jesus freely gives us the love that we share with others. Knowing we are loved allows us to love. We radiate *agape* because we have received agape.

But I grew up, as many do, not fully understanding this. Somehow I understood that eternal life was mine despite my sins, but at the same time I thought life on earth was to be lived by following “good,” “Christian” standards to improve myself. In a distorted way, I believed the law-based system of the Old Covenant was still in effect and that, while I was fully saved by grace, it was my job to live life on earth by trying to be honest, obedient, kind ... and most of all loving.

At the time I had no words or understanding for why I was struggling. I knew something wasn't working, but I just kept trying harder to make my version of the “Christian” life work

God, in His mercy, would show me the root of the problem, but it would be a rough and painful journey ...

Ponder for a Moment

In the past, have you ever felt that something wasn't right in your life, but had no words or understanding about the root cause? If so, describe such a time.

If you could give your emotional/thought life to a friend, would they want what you have? How would they describe that life?

Day 16



Nothing without Love

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

The truth of those words crashed down upon me one hot, August morning. It had been about ten years since God had poured out His love on me that unforgettable evening as I lay on the floor of the church.

From Scripture I understood the importance of loving God and neighbor. So, like a “good” Christian, I was trying my hardest to do what I absolutely knew God wanted me to do—to be kind, caring and compassionate like He was.

But in the years since that night at church, I’d failed miserably. I’d had an affair. How could I have done such a terrible thing—especially after experiencing God’s love in such a dramatic way? I felt as though I’d spit in God’s face and told Him He wasn’t enough. I had sinned horribly. I felt like I didn’t deserve to be loved.

“God is love.” I knew that intellectually. But I simply couldn’t accept it personally—down in the core of myself. I felt that I needed to clean myself up before I could be acceptable to God. So I shut myself off from relationship—receiving what I felt I absolutely did not deserve.

In order to keep from sinning in such a horrible way again, I put all sorts of additional, Christian-sounding rules on myself: “Mary, you have to pray more.” “You have to walk in the Spirit.” “Don’t ever be alone with a man except your husband.” Like a modern-day Pharisee, I plastered myself with rules to prevent sin from coming out.

I couldn’t fathom that, after what I’d done, God could still love me. In my twisted thinking, I believed I had to earn God’s love by obeying His commands ... so I could prove I loved Him ... so He would then want to be in relationship with me. I had no understanding of the spirit, soul and body, and that the core need of my soul was to know God’s love—the very love I had shut myself off from by thinking my sin disqualified me.

This was the condition of my life that hot, August day ... when during a morning Bible study with a dear, older friend, she leaned forward and said, “Mary, can I tell you something?” The intensity of her eyes told me it was important.

“Yes,” I said.

Her blue eyes looked into mine. “Mary, you don’t love.”

The words hit me like a freight train. It was true—horribly true. *I didn’t love*. The first few verses of 1 Corinthians 13 flashed through my mind. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal....” I didn’t love and love was the most important thing. I was nothing—nothing but a loud, irritating noise-maker.

I was failing miserably at the most important thing in life. The affair had ended years ago. I’d told my husband and he had forgiven me. We were going to church as a family and had youth group meetings in our home. Multiple Sclerosis was less of an issue for me and I was able to care for our children and do volunteer work for a mission organization. I was trying so hard to be good and love God and others. But life wasn’t working and I didn’t know why.

I came out of my chair and lay face down on the living room carpet. What was wrong with me anyway? Why couldn’t I love?

In total desperation, a prayer gushed out. “God, fix the wrong in me. I want to love. Whatever it takes.”

Ponder for a Moment

Consider a time in your life when you felt you didn’t deserve to be loved. What made you feel that way?

Do you think God agreed with your opinion of yourself as being undeserving of love? Why or why not?

Day 17



Jesus' New Command

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (John 13:34)

Two years had passed since I'd prayed on my friend's living room carpet: “God, fix what is wrong with me. I want to love. Whatever it takes.”

In those years, “Whatever it takes” had taken a lot—so much, that had I known what was entailed, I would not have prayed those words. My marriage of 24 years had ended in divorce. My oldest son, a brilliant student-athlete, had fallen into alcohol abuse, dropped out of Harvard and ended up in a mental hospital. The grief was almost more than I could bear. All my attempts to maintain the shiny façade of my “good Christian” life (and “help” those around me maintain the façade as well) had come to a painful end. My self-inflicted, rule-based version of Christianity had failed.

I was broken and desperate ... when one Sunday I heard a freeing truth.

“What is the most important command that Jesus gives?” the visiting speaker began by asking. My pastor raised his hand: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’ and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37–39). I would have responded similarly.

But the speaker opened his Bible and pointed out that these were *Old* Covenant commands. Jesus had spoken in answer to a question posed by a Pharisee, “Teacher which is the greatest commandment of the law?” (Matthew 22:36). And then, to make it extra clear that these were Old Covenant commands, Jesus had concluded by saying, “On these two commands hang *all the law and the prophets*” (Matthew 22:40).

God intends that we live with Him in love. But the purpose of the Old Covenant wasn't to get us back into loving relationship. Even before He gave the law through Moses, God knew that His commandments would be impossible to always obey. Rather, the purpose of the law was to make it abundantly clear that people were incapable of keeping the commandments.

God's intent was that the law would help us realize that our best efforts are not enough. We need help. We need a Savior! “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24).

Jesus brought a New Covenant with a new commandment to replace the Old Covenant with its Ten Commandments. On the night of the last supper, He took a cup of wine and shared it with the disciples saying, “This cup is the *new covenant* in My blood” (1 Corinthians 11:25). Then He gave one “new commandment” to go with the New Covenant. He said, “A *new* commandment I

give to you, that you love one another; *as I have loved you*, that you also love one another.”

Wow! A new commandment—a new way to love—made possible by Jesus! I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

Without realizing it, I had wrongly assumed that because I'd accepted Jesus, I was living in the New Covenant. Yet really, I'd been trying to meet the impossible demands of the Old Covenant.

But this new command was different. It wasn't about trying to love God and my neighbor out of my own strength. It was believing that Jesus loved me. Knowing God's great love for us allows us to love others. God Himself is the source of the love. Believing Jesus' love for us fulfills the command.

This was why I wasn't loving. Because I wasn't letting myself receive God's love (because I didn't feel worthy ... because I'd sinned so horribly), I had nothing to give away except a cheap imitation of “love” dressed in “good-Christian” façade.

Dear brother, dear sister, God didn't intend that Christianity be just another religion with impossible rules to obey. Trying to follow rules, do the right things and love God and others in your own strength doesn't work. God is the source of the love you get to freely receive ... and freely give.

Ponder for a Moment

In what ways might you be trying to live in both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant at the same time?

What connection do you personally feel between knowing you are loved and loving others?

Day 18



Born to Be Loved

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us.” (1 John 4:10)

“We love Him because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

We are born to be loved. The soul of each and every one of us carries this foundational need. If we dig down deep enough past the temporary satisfactions that come from worldly pleasures, we will find it. If we let ourselves feel the need we try to cover up through addictions and busyness, we will find it.

We all need love: God preprogrammed us this way. We can't be the people He intends without knowing we are treasured, valued and accepted. It is as if God made us with holes in our hearts that can only be filled in loving relationship.

It isn't enough to supply a child with food and shelter. Babies need to be cuddled and cherished. From birth we are made to be cooed at and fussed over, held close and carried about. We are meant to know from early on that we are special and adored.

Research has shown this to be true over and over again. Children reared in understaffed orphanages or by inattentive caregivers struggle throughout life. Newborns who do not receive nurturing care grow up to be socially and emotionally distant. Relating to others—even caring others—is difficult. Rather than feeling connected and secure, they feel anxious and uneasy. These same infants often grow up to be poor parents themselves. They can't give what they haven't received.

God created us to be loved ... and so, “He first loved us.”

Think of a good father with his newborn. He holds the baby close to his chest. He strokes her tiny head with his fingers. When the little one opens her eyes the father smiles and coos. He rocks the baby and sings to her. What joy the father experiences in just being with his child.

Through spit ups, dirty diapers and crying in the night, the good father treasures and adores his baby. Nothing can shake that love.

Think about it. The father doesn't demand that the baby love him. The father doesn't hold the little one at arm's length and say, “Love me baby. Love me with everything in you. Love me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love me and I will love you in return. Just be good and I will love you.” No. The father doesn't do that.

And neither does God. How could God's love for us be any less than a good father's love for his child?

Yet somehow we often act like it is. It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to love God or others without first really knowing (not just intellectually, but experientially) that our Father loves us. The impossible demands of the Old Covenant law ring in our ears. "You shall love the LORD your God.... You shall love your neighbor...." (Matthew 22:37, 39).

But without first knowing we are loved, it is impossible to follow these commands. Just like children raised in understaffed orphanages, we can't give what we haven't first received.

Jesus came to earth to make a new way—to forge a New Covenant. God as a baby in a manger—God as a man nailed to the cross—is the source and supply of the love we all so desperately need.

God loves you first. You are valuable and precious. You don't need to do anything to earn it. You don't need to hold a certain set of beliefs. You don't need to be anything different than you are right now. Every bit of God loves every bit of you. He is for you in every way. God loves you despite.... He treasures you always.... He cherishes you just because.... Jesus came to fill the holes in your heart—the holes designed to be filled with love.

Ponder for a Moment

How do you explain the source of your desire to belong and be accepted, to be appreciated and valued?

In what ways might early life experiences have made it difficult for you to receive care and affection from others? from God?

Day 19



God, Know My Heart

“Search me, O God and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23–24)

“Search me.” “Know my heart.” “Try me.” “Lead me.” This is David’s cry. He is asking for God to shine His light into his deepest thoughts and feelings—into the depths of his heart. There is no hiding, bargaining or game-playing. David lays his heart—the organ of spirit and soul together—open for God to renew anything that is not right within. David is serious about letting God do His work, whatever it takes.

What enabled David to pray this prayer? What enabled him to be so honest and vulnerable before God?

David could approach the Lord like this because he understood God’s nature. He knew God would not be put off by his sins or wrong thinking. He knew God would not reject, despise or shame him. This gave David confidence to return again and again to God, in times of failure or triumph, sadness or joy.

After Samuel confronted King David about his affair with Bathsheba, David prayed, “Have mercy upon me. O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies.” “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:1, 10).

King Saul wasn’t like this. When he sinned, he ran from God and hid behind excuses. When he failed to wait for Samuel and presented the offering to the Lord himself, he gave excuses. “The people were scattered ... you did not come ... the Philistines gathered” (1 Samuel 13:11).

We also see this difference between Peter and Judas. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. But he was so eager to be with Him again that he leaped out of the fishing boat and swam to meet Jesus on the shore. Judas, on the other hand, betrayed Jesus and then went away and hung himself.

The difference between David and Saul, between Peter and Judas, was not that one sinned less than the other. Each and every one of us sins in too many ways to count. The difference was that David and Peter turned toward God even in failure, whereas Saul and Judas turned away.

After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve hid from God and that has been the default position of the human race ever since. Our “opened” eyes do not see God as He really is. We avoid the One who wants to be with us and help us. We run from the One who forgives and restores.

Knowing that God is for us gives us the confidence to come to Him and let Him do the

searching. Now we can be vulnerable and welcome Him into thoughts and feelings hidden even from ourselves. We all have distorted thinking patterns that warp our minds and twist our feelings and actions in ways of which we are unaware. God knows these things and He will bring His freeing truth to us.

When we welcome Him, the Holy Spirit will search, He will find and He will uproot what is not right. He will cleanse us of hurtful ways of thinking, feeling and acting. When David said, "See if there be any wicked way in me," the words wicked way actually mean way of pain, stress, brokenness and misunderstanding. David gave God permission to look for deep-seated patterns of thoughts and their associated feelings that were causing him to be less than the man God intended.

Trusting God to have His way in us allows Him to do the work of changing us from the inside out. We come to know God as we let Him know us. As we share our thoughts and feelings with Him, we experience Him in our ups and downs, our healings and hurts, our victories and sins.

Ponder for a Moment

"Search me, O God and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Let David's prayer be yours today.

Day 20



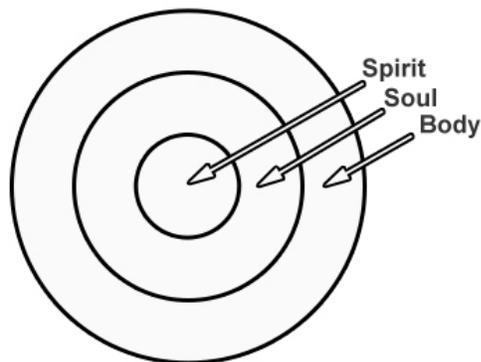
Your Spirit, Soul and Body

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)

God designed us in His image. He wants us to know and radiate His nature of lovingkindness. We are called to be like Jesus in this world.

So, how does God intend that we function? How *did* God make us to be like Him?

We are made up of three parts: *spirit*, *soul* and *body*. Each has a different and vital function, but God designed that the parts work together in agreement with Him.



Our *spirit* is designed to be the resting place for God. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16). When we believe in Jesus, He comes to live in our spirit and we are “born again” into eternal life.

But our life in Christ isn’t meant to stop there. Our soul and body also need restoring.

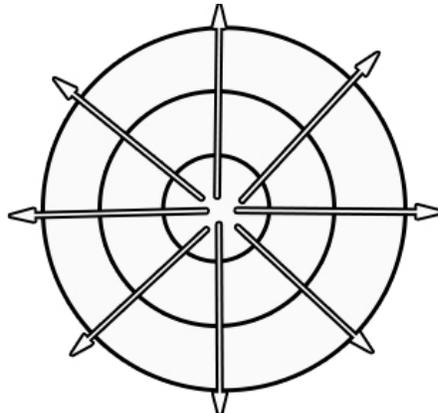
Our *soul* is composed of our *mind*, *will* and *emotions*; it is our unique self. God made our mind, will and emotions to be filled with Him—permeated by His thoughts and feelings. We are meant to be led by His Spirit in our spirit. But we have free will. Our soul can do as it pleases. It can agree with the Spirit or it can hold to thoughts and emotions that oppose God. It can choose its own will over God’s.

As we grow in relationship with God, we surrender the ways of our independent soul and let Him lead. Untrue, hurtful thoughts and feelings we learned from trying to survive on our own in a messed-up world die away as we grow in agreement with Him.

We don't lose our unique self as we grow in Christ. Our personality is a lasting gift God gives to each one of us. We may still enjoy painting or playing soccer, for example. We may still tend to be quiet and reserved or talkative and outgoing. But now God's nature flows through our unique personality.

Our *body* is the house for the inward, hidden spirit and soul. "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The *body* keeps us alive on earth. It eats, drinks and interfaces with the physical world. In God's design, our *body* expresses our mind, will and emotions. When our soul is renewed, as we paint, we portray the beauty of the earth He created or the compassion of a mother for her baby. When our soul is renewed, we treat other soccer players with the same care and compassion God has for us. It is the contents of our soul—not our spirit directly—that causes our body to act as it does.

We are not meant to forge our own way in life by relying on the strength of our independent soul and trying to make ourselves look "right" on the outside. God's intent is that we be led by the Spirit—not the soul (no matter the "good" or religious nature of its intentions). God's design is that we know His love deep inside of us and radiate Him from the inside out. Our spirit is made alive with His Spirit. Our soul is renewed so that we come to think and feel about ourselves and others as God does. And our body manifests the contents of our soul, giving God expression on earth.



In this way, God is seen and heard through each and every one of His children. He is the source of His image in us. Just as God showed Himself through Jesus Christ, He shows Himself through us. He is the source of love and we are the spirit-soul-body channels that express His love on earth.

It is a promise. The God of peace will sanctify us completely in spirit, soul and body. "He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."

Ponder for a Moment

In what ways does this understanding of how God created you—spirit, soul and body—bring clarity to your struggles and/or purpose in life? Explain.

Day 21



Jesus in the Last Garden

“Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane ... and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death, stay here and watch with Me.’ He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’” (Matthew 26:36–39)

In the *Garden of Gethsemane*, Jesus fought the greatest war of eternity. The souls of every man, woman and child who had ever lived and who would ever live were at stake. Jesus battled for us all that night. His agony of soul was for you and for me.

God created humankind to live in relationship with Him and to reign over the earth in keeping with His lovingkindness. God intended that we express His *will* on earth. He intended that the soul (the mind, *will* and emotions) of humanity be under His guidance because that is what is best for us.

But, in the *Garden of Eden*, Adam fell for Satan’s temptation and chose his own *will* over God’s. He cut himself off from relationship—from life in God’s goodness. After the fall, humans, with their “opened” eyes and new-found knowledge of good and evil, had to make their own decisions. Now the independent soul, separated from God, reigned over earth.

The Father sent His Son as a man to accomplish in the last garden (Gethsemane) what Adam had fallen from in the first (Eden). He came to win back our place in union with God.

In this passage we see the intensity of the battle that raged in the last garden. Jesus asked for the cup to pass ... but nevertheless willed His suffering *soul* to hold fast to God’s *will*. “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.... O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, *not as I will, but as You will.*”

We cannot grasp the anguish. As he battled in the garden, Jesus sweat drops of blood knowing what lay before Him.

Scripture records the horrid physical events that followed in vivid detail. Jesus was betrayed, falsely accused, whipped, spat upon and cursed. He stumbled along a path lined with mockers to a hill called Golgotha. A crown of thorns was pressed upon His head. Onlookers despised the “King of the Jews” nailed to the cross for their sins.

Yet the internal horror is hidden from view. The suffering of the “cup” was far greater than we can comprehend. It was as if Jesus’ heart was being torn in two. Throughout His life He had al-

ways done His Father's will ... and known He was pleasing to His Father. But now, doing God's will meant not unity, but separation; it meant experiencing the Father's judgment and wrath.

When Jesus surrendered His will and took the sin of the human race upon Himself, the relationship He knew with His Father was severed. In agony of soul He cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Our Savior bore the punishment of separation and wrath our sin deserved.

In the last garden, Jesus chose His Father's will over His own. Our restored relationship with God—our acceptance and embrace—came through Jesus' loss of these very things. Jesus took the wrath we deserved for our sin and gave us instead His life in union with God. In this way, Jesus became the perfect expression—the unbroken channel—for God's love on earth.

Dearly beloved, let your soul rest in Jesus' sacrifice. He chose to lay down His life, becoming in His death the greatest expression of love the world will ever know. He bore the penalty for your sin; He took the separation you deserved. Jesus reconciles you, as you really are, to the Father, as He really is. This is the vastness of His love for you.

Ponder for a Moment

Consider Jesus' struggle to surrender His will to the will of His Father. What does this mean to you personally?

Day 22



Law and Love

“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13:8–10)

Obedience to the Old Covenant law is not the basis of God’s acceptance of us; and it is not the means by which we come to enjoy eternal life. Following rules and regulations, even those based on Scripture, will never get us back to God.

The Ten Commandments clearly spell out the good to do and the evil to avoid, but the law doesn’t provide the ability to actually do what it says. The knowledge of good and evil (as clearly defined by the Old Covenant law) drives us to try and become like God by doing good and avoiding evil. But our independent soul, separated from God, simply cannot do the “good” it intends; religion doesn’t work.

When God gave the Ten Commandments, He knew that in our fallen nature, obedience was impossible. But He gave the Old Covenant anyway ... so we could learn that fact for ourselves. He gave the law to show us our utter inability to obey the law ... so we would come to the end of ourselves ... give up on our independent soul-led living ... and find life in Jesus. “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24).

Voices in our heads may tell us differently. Satan is a legalist; he will whisper condemning thoughts based on our failures to measure up to the standards we hold. He will tell us things like, “You lied again.” “Shame on you.” “You won’t ever be good enough!”

Don’t listen to these lies. God’s lovingkindness is the basis of your acceptance. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). The love of the Father, Son and Spirit is the firm, unshakable foundation of your eternal life. It’s not about your sins keeping you away; it’s about God keeping you close. It’s not about your exclusion and failure under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; it’s about your inclusion in Jesus’ victory.

God doesn’t love you because you are good. He makes you good because He loves you.

As we come to know God’s love, we become naturally obedient. When we know we are loved, we treat others with that same love. And, the one “who loves another has fulfilled the law.” If we love someone, we won’t commit adultery, murder or steal. We will honor them, respect them

and want what is best for them. Knowing we are loved makes us good so that we radiate His lovingkindness from the inside out.

Scripture doesn't say, "Love *abolishes* the law." Love doesn't do away with the law. It doesn't make stealing or adultery OK. Love isn't lawless. Rather, love verifies that the law is right. Love *fulfills* the law; it makes the commandments naturally doable for the soul at rest in God's love.

We live out the life God desires and promised for us, not by putting external rules on ourselves to stifle "bad" behaviors, but by truly becoming good from the inside out. Our soul isn't meant to try and live by obeying rules. It is meant to live by obeying the Spirit—by living in agreement with God who is love.

With our spirit alive with His Spirit, our soul abiding in Jesus' love and our body naturally expressing that, the law is fulfilled! "Love is the fulfillment of the law."

Ponder for a Moment

What thoughts and feelings arise in you as you consider the statement: "God doesn't love you because you are good. He makes you good because He loves you."

What thoughts and feelings arise in you as you consider the Scripture, "Love is the fulfillment of the law"?

In some way might you have been thinking God desires your obedience or holiness more than He desires you? Explain your answer.

Day 23



Faith and Love

“The grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:14)

Throughout the New Testament *faith* and *love* are repeatedly spoken of together. Both are vitally important and inseparable.

In his letters, Paul thanks God for these two “exceedingly abundant” expressions of the grace he sees in others. “We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... since we heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of your *love* for all the saints” (Colossians 1:3–4). “Therefore I also, after I heard of your *faith* in the Lord Jesus and your *love* for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you” (Ephesians 1:15–16). “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren ... because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other” (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Why is Paul so thankful for the *faith* and *love* he sees in others?

Paul is thankful because faith and love are evidence that God is at work in us. God is the source of our faith and our love. Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). And God gives us the love that makes our loving possible. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

If we think of faith or love as something we are responsible for generating, then we put ourselves back under the law and its impossibility. Faith and love are not a result of our independent efforts; they come from receiving what God freely gives. Faith doesn’t earn us life in Christ; it connects us to that life which Jesus has already earned for us. Our part is not to try to earn God’s love; our part is simply to accept that we are loved.

Receiving faith or love is like unwrapping a gift. Someone can give us a present, but unless we choose to open the present, we can’t enjoy it. Although it has been bought and paid for, we can’t enjoy its amazing benefits until we unwrap it.

Faith comes first because belief is what connects us to God so that what He has already done for us becomes real in experience. The Christian life is meant to be lived by faith—by being led by the Spirit (not by the soul). Without faith we can do our own religious (or non-religious) things, but we completely miss the mark of living in life-giving relationship with God.

Love comes second because it is the essence of God who we come to know by faith. Believing that we are always welcomed by God gives us the freedom to stop pretending to be somebody

we hope will be acceptable and live in the freedom of knowing His acceptance. Knowing we are valued and treasured allows us to treat others as the valued and treasured people they are.

In this way, through actions based in love, our faith comes alive in expression. Scripture tells us, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). Our belief in God doesn’t just stay silent within us. It works itself out in love. The works that faith does are done in love. Faith reaches up to God; then love reaches out to others.

God designed our lives to be lived in faith and love. We take a step of faith—of looking to Jesus—with one foot. Then we take a step of love—of compassionate works prompted by faith—with the other. “Faith [works] through love” (Galatians 5:6).

My brother, my sister, God’s joy in you rises with your acceptance of all He gives. He is so pleased when you accept His “exceedingly abundant” grace. It fills Him with delight when you receive the “faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”

Ponder for a Moment

Have you ever tried to work up faith in yourself? What has been the result of that effort?

Have you ever tried to work up love in yourself? What has been the result of that effort?

Think of someone (or several people) you can be thankful for today ... because of their faith and love.

Day 24



John's Identity: "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved"

"Then Peter, turning around, saw [John] the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 21:20)

If somebody asked you, "Who are you?" what would you say? How would you describe yourself?

You might answer by talking about your job, your possessions, your children, the color of your skin or your country of origin. You might define yourself by what other people say about you or by what has happened to you in the past. These types of responses paint a picture of how the world see us.

But the Apostle John saw himself differently. He chose to be known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20).

John did not describe himself as "a Jewish man from Galilee," nor as "a fisherman." He did not even call himself "a follower of Jesus" or "the disciple *who loved Jesus*." John called himself, "the disciple *whom Jesus loved*." John's identity was firmly grounded *in Jesus' love for him*.

John knew his identity in Christ, yet all too often we resist ours. We struggle against the love He gives. We wonder, "How could He really care that much about me?" It seems too good to be true.

Instead, we are tempted to accept the thoughts concocted by Satan, "the father of lies" (John 8:44), and supported by the world around us. Since the fall, Satan has bombarded all of us humans with untrue thoughts and feelings that, if we believe, leave us feeling worthless, rejected, anxious or, on the opposite extreme, smugly self-satisfied and superior to others. Layers of guilt and shame on the one hand, or egotistical pride on the other, obscure our true identity.

We were made in the image of God. But all too often we reverse God's original intent and make Him to fit the image we have of ourselves. We develop a view of God (often aided by religion) that supports our false view of self. In our minds we fashion God so that He somehow fits with the lies Satan throws at us. For example, if we condemn ourselves for a certain behavior, we will make up a God who condemns us—even though Scripture tells us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Oblivious to the truth of who God is, we unwittingly live life guided by visions of a being who exists only in the warped perceptions of our souls.

Jesus understands the genesis of our darkened minds. He feels the abuse we suffered. He knows the grief, the heartaches, the sorrow, the anxious strivings. He is aware of our family, its dysfunction and how, from our mother's womb, we grew to hold false ideas about ourselves,

others and God.

Jesus took all that upon Himself. He took our sins and unbelief and entered into our fallen state. Yet He stands before the Father, seeing Him as He really is. Jesus knows the bondage and blindness of our fallen minds and He knows “what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1). He knows our Father’s heart and He shares the Father’s heart with us in our darkness.

As the Spirit brings light to our twisted thinking, we come to a fork in the road. We have a decision to make. Will we stay jailed in our world-based way of thinking or will we embrace the unknown freedom of life God’s way? Will we hang onto our old thought paradigms or will we embrace the new?

John the Apostle embraced the new. In chapter 13 of his Gospel, it was as if the veil fell from John’s eyes and he saw Jesus’ love for him and all humanity. On the night of the last supper, just after Jesus washed his feet, John began to call himself, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Ponder for a Moment

Can you identify any thoughts you might be telling yourself about yourself that aren’t true? If so, record those thoughts.

How might your view of self be impacting your view of God?

“The disciple whom Jesus loves.” Write that name for yourself on something you can see every day ... as a reminder of who you really are in Christ.

Day 25



In Christ, Nothing Can Separate You from God's Love

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35, 38–39)

Paul says it clearly. He has lived it and he knows. “[Nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing can stop God from loving you. But evil can and does work to prevent you from believing you are loved. Over and over again, in various ways, Satan tempts us to think we are unworthy of God's affection. “You are a disgrace,” Satan whispers into our thoughts. “How could anyone want to be with you?”

Consider the life of Saul (who became Paul) and the condemning thoughts he must have had to overcome. As a zealous young Pharisee, Saul had participated in stoning Stephen. He had persecuted and put to death believers. If anyone deserved to be cut off from God, it would have been Paul. Think of how Satan must have tempted him to think God couldn't possibly want him after what he had done.

Another trick Satan uses to separate us is to make us think that we can earn God's approval if we just try harder. He tempts: “Obey these rules.” “Try this program.” “Pray more.” “Give more.” “Keep trying.”

Prior to his experience on the Damascus Road, Saul was living in this trap. He was a self-described “Hebrew of Hebrews ... a Pharisee ... concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5). Saul was zealously following the rules of his religion. But no religion can fix the problem of our separation from God.

Jesus is the only solution. The freeing truth is that He died for our sins. He repaired the gap. He reconciles us to the Father.

Yet another trick Satan uses is to tempt us to think that when something bad happens, it is proof that God doesn't care. “If God really loved you,” he whispers, “why didn't He prevent the cancer?” “The abuse and suffering?” “The child's premature death?”

As a believer, Paul was stoned, shipwrecked, beaten and jailed. He witnessed his friends being persecuted and killed for their faith. Yet, he remained steadfast; he knew tribulation and

persecution, famine and sword were not signs that Jesus had abandoned him. In fact, he wrote, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed.... For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:16–17).

My friend, your suffering is not a sign that God is unhappy with you. Your afflictions are not evidence that God has abandoned you. Rather, God uses the hard times to draw you to Him so you can come to know and trust Him in deeper ways. Through the trials, He is working His glory—His nature—into you.

Falsely believing that we can be separated from God causes us to act like it. If we don't recognize God's constant lovingkindness toward us, we will live life trying to get back into His favor. Instead of living from the foundation of knowing we are loved and valued, we will live struggling to earn love and value.

It isn't our job to try to keep ourselves in God's love. In Christ you and I are in His love. Whether you agree with it or not, whether you believe it or not, you are loved by God. Your belief, does not change the truth, but believing the truth does change you.

Your position in Christ is one of inseparable union! Absolutely nothing can come between you and the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Ponder for a Moment

Is there something that you think can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ? If so, what does this Scripture speak to you specifically about that something?

How would you personally sum up today's Scripture?

Day 26



Transformed

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2)

When we receive Jesus, our spirit is born again. God’s Spirit now lives in our spirit. In union with God, we share in the Trinity’s eternal life.

But we can still think we are separated ... and therefore live like it. Just because we have accepted Jesus does not mean we automatically become the people God intends.

What is our problem? Once saved into the Trinity’s life of love, why can’t we live the life we see promised in Scripture? Why do we still struggle so much to be “good” Christians?

Our spirit isn’t the problem; it is born again. Our body isn’t the problem; it simply reflects the thoughts and feelings of the soul. Our soul is the problem! Our mind, will and emotions are not in agreement with God.

Proverbs 23:7 tells us, “As he thinks in his heart, so is he.” Thinking wrongly causes us to live wrongly. Even as believers, we don’t make known—we don’t “prove”—“the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” because we think of ourselves as less than we are and we think of God as less than He is.

When we are young and vulnerable, Satan begins planting twisted thoughts in our minds. The enemy knows that the core need of every person is to be cherished and adored. So, in order to steal, kill and destroy us human beings created in God’s image, the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10) fills our souls with wrong thoughts and feelings. He uses life experiences and traumatic events to keep us from seeing ourselves as treasured and valuable.

The lies he plants might be something like: “You are not loved because you are _____. And then the blank is filled in with words such as: “unwanted,” “not as good as your brother,” or “not smart enough.” Or perhaps the lies take the form: “You need to _____ in order to prove your worth.” And then the blank is filled in with something impossible to do, such as: “obey the Ten Commandments,” “please your mother” or “be tougher.”

It is not easy to recognize these twisted misconceptions. They hide in wordless silence beneath the radar of conscious thought, deep in the foundational structure of our mind, will and emotions. Recurrent, distressing feelings (such as anxiety, terror, hopelessness or separation) are the voice of your soul crying out, “Help me.” “Things aren’t right.” “I’m hurting.”

We weren't *taught* the lies that manifest in these distressing feelings; it is more like we *caught* them. We *caught* them in the context of family, culture and upbringing.

Based on our interpretations of our experiences in the world, we form assumptions about ourselves, God and others.

But what if these assumptions are false? What if you are worth more than you can comprehend? What if God values and adores you, not as the world values you, not because you do "good" things, not with the underlying motive of changing or improving you, but just because you are you?

There is hope. In keeping with God's Word, the Spirit reveals truth to us. We grow in agreement with truth as we grow to know Jesus in the ongoing relationship of eternal life. And so we bring ourselves as hurting, vulnerable people in desperate need and let the Spirit reveal Jesus to us. We welcome Him to search and cleanse our souls. Even in difficulties, we trust Him and accept His ways of renewing our minds.

What God says about you is true. You are His "very good" of creation. He fashioned you in your mother's womb. He rejoices over you. He delights in you.

God is working with you and in you to renew your mind so you become the person He created you to be. You are designed to express—to "prove" to the world—"the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Ponder for a Moment

When do you tend to experience recurrent emotions you know aren't healthy?

What untrue thoughts about yourself, God or others might underlie those emotions?

Imagine what it might be like to have your mind renewed so that you think of yourself as God thinks of you.

Day 27



Jesus' Identity: "My Beloved Son"

"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3:16–17)

"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus heard these words as a man when he was baptized in the Jordan River. He heard these words as a person who, as far as we know from Scripture, had done nothing noteworthy in life up to that point. He heard His Father's words before He had a single follower, taught a single lesson or did a single miracle.

Jesus was born in an animal shed to a poor, unmarried girl. Soon after His birth, His family had to flee as refugees to a foreign land because authorities were trying to kill Him. Jesus was a 30-year-old carpenter living in an insignificant, little town when His heavenly Father spoke over Him, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Despite worldly evidence to the contrary, Jesus believed those words; He knew them as His identity.

Immediately upon being baptized, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted to do something to prove the identity just spoken by His Father, "This is My beloved Son." Satan tempted, "*If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.... If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down....*" (Matthew 4:3–6).

Adam and Eve had been similarly tested. They were created in God's image. God had said, "Let us make man in Our image, *according to Our likeness*" (Genesis 1:26). But Satan tempted: "In the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be *like God....*" (Genesis 4:5). Humankind already was like God; we were created *according to His likeness*.

But the serpent deceived: "Do this and make yourself better." "Make yourself like God." So the first couple did something they thought would make them become who (God had said) they already were. They ate the fruit and completely lost sight of their God-given identity.

Satan's temptation is still the same today: "Prove yourself." "Do something grand and eye-catching." "What God says about you isn't true." "You aren't enough." Satan tempts us to do something God hasn't asked of us—to step away from the Spirit's leading and follow the leading of our independent soul.

Being believers doesn't exempt us from this deception. Rather "the father of lies" (John 8:44)

adds new twists. “Follow these Christian guidelines and improve yourself.” “You need to expand your ministry.” “Prove yourself by doing miracles.”

But trying to become prevents us from simply resting in who we already are. In Christ, there is no need to work *for* approval, rather, our good works *come from* the foundation of experiencing His approval.

Jesus didn't try to prove Himself. He only did what His Father gave Him to do. He said, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself does” (John 5:19–20). Jesus' life flowed out of believing His Father's words and knowing He was the beloved Son. At every step, He was led by the Spirit and walked in agreement with—in obedience to—His loving Father.

We were created to do the same—to be led by the Spirit and walk in obedience to the love of God. Jesus is our example. He isn't an example we get to try to copy in our own strength; He is the supreme example we get to believe in! In His death, Jesus regained for us our God-given identity stolen in the fall. He made a way for us to be like Him.

You don't need to do anything to prove your identity. As a beloved son/daughter, the works God chooses you to participate in flow out of your relationship with Him.

Ponder for a Moment

Have you thought you needed to do something more to prove your identity in Christ? Explain your answer.

In Christ you are accepted and adored. Write a sentence or recall a Scripture that reminds you personally of this truth.

Day 28



Abide in My Love

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.... As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.” (John 15:4–5, 9)

Jesus’ analogy of the vine and the branches paints a beautiful picture of our life in union with Him. Think of a flourishing grapevine; in Christ, our lives are vibrant and bountiful like the branches of that grapevine.

Jesus is the vine; He is the root, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. He is the *entire* vine and we are part of Him. The vine is the whole and we, the branches, are an integral part of that whole.

The vine and the branches are of the same substance. There is no separation between them. The same sap runs through both. We fit together perfectly with Jesus; He is a part of us and we are a part of Him. He lives in us and we live in Him; we abide in His love.

When the branch is connected to the vine, it flourishes. The life of the vine flows through the branches and produces grapes. Apart from Christ, we are lifeless branches.

But we can be fooled. The limbs of a dead Christmas tree can be hung with pretty ornaments. We can decorate ourselves to fit people-pleasing norms. From the outside, ornaments look “nice,” but only fruit carries the seeds of life. The independent soul is capable of making ornaments, but it is not capable of producing fruit.

Fruit doesn’t come from being “nice” or religious. Apart from God, our thinking, our studying, our hard work, even our prayers, can’t produce fruit. No matter how well-intentioned our efforts be, fruit of the vine—fruit of the Spirit—is not “fruit of our effort.” Fruit of the Spirit comes as we are led by the Spirit in ongoing relationship with God.

Fruit of the Spirit differs from gifts of the Spirit. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell *upon* the 120 believers waiting in Jerusalem and they received gifts of the Spirit. Still today the Holy Spirit comes *upon* us and we receive gifts of the Spirit including speaking in tongues, prophecy, words of knowledge and the working of miracles.

But fruit of the Spirit comes from a deep, abiding relationship *within*. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22). Fruit are traits of Christ’s nature which bubble up from *within* us.

Fruit is evidence of His life in us. It comes naturally as we rest in Jesus just as a branch abides in the vine. We are full of love, joy and peace because Christ in us is these things. "Abide in Me." "Abide in My love." These words hold the key to our life in Christ. Fruit comes naturally as we rest in God's love.

Branches can't produce fruit without being part of the vine and the vine can't produce fruit without its branches. Jesus gives us a vital place in His life and work. We are wanted and included in God's plan to share His goodness with the world. We are His open arms. We are his mouthpiece speaking words of truth and encouragement. He has chosen to show His goodness to the world through us. We are fruit-bearing branches overflowing with His life.

You, my friend, are an integral part of the greatest love the world will ever know. God's nature is reflected through the earthen vessel of your humanity. Life on earth is your opportunity to bring to others, the goodness of God ... so that they too can be an integral part of the greatest love the world will ever know.

Ponder for a Moment

Picture a flourishing grapevine with branches overflowing with grapes. What does this image portray about your life as a vital part of Jesus, the vine?

Recall a particularly memorable time when you were able to care for someone with extraordinary kindness and compassion. Record your experience.

Day 29



Together ... because of His Great Love

“But God who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4–6)

Three times in this passage Paul repeats the word “together.” God has “made us alive *together* with Christ.” He has “raised us up *together*.” He has “made us to sit *together* in the heavenly place in Christ Jesus.” “Together.” “Together.” “Together.” The bond is sealed tight. There is no separation; we are one in Christ.

God’s purpose was not just to create us. It was not just to help us live a better life on earth. It was not just to welcome us to heaven when we died. It was not just to give us a glimpse of the Trinity’s glory. His purpose was to unite us with Christ so that we are together with Him in the intimate, vibrant, eternal life the Trinity enjoy.

But how could God accomplish this? We were dead in our sin. We had completely missed the mark of living in unity with Him. In the fall we had sunk into the trap of doing our own thing apart from God. We had lost sight of who God was. And the Old Covenant was proof that we couldn’t obey our way out of it, work our way out of it or earn our way out of it.

So, the Father sent His Son. In the form of a person like us. Jesus came down from the light of heaven and descended into our darkness. He took our sin; He took our blindness of not seeing God’s goodness and our messed-up thinking (that we were fine without Him). Jesus entered into our human nature; He was tempted as we are—with sin and unbelief.

Jesus became one with us. When He died on the cross, all of our sin—all of our blindness, unbelief and disunity with God—died too. Jesus took our Adam-nature—our old way of thinking and being—to the grave.

But He didn’t stop there. Jesus rose in resurrection life! He ascended to the Father and when He did, He carried us with Him! When He rose, we rose—to “sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Jesus’ oneness with His Father became ours.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus accomplished this for us. It is done. Today we get to live knowing and believing the truth: we get to live and knowing and believing Jesus.

But what compelled Jesus to do what He did? Why did He do it? What is His heart for us? How does He really feel about you?

This Scripture makes clear the answer to these questions. God is “rich in mercy.” He made us alive together in Christ “because of His great love with which He loved us.”

Jesus did what He did because He loves you and me. He treasures you. He values you. He doesn't just love you because He is good and that is what He is supposed to do. He doesn't love you grudgingly out of duty. God adores you extravagantly. He actually enjoys you and wants to be with you. He delights in you like a good father delights in his child.

And His love is backed by action. He doesn't just say what you want to hear. He would do anything to help you become your very best—your true self as He created you to be.

Jesus carried you all the way into the Father's embrace. The cross isn't just about your sins being forgiven so you can go to heaven when you die; the cross is also about living in oneness with Jesus—in the acceptance and adoration of the Trinity—surrounded and infused with the relational rightness your soul craves.

In Christ, you are alive *together*, raised up *together*, seated *together*. You are eternally *together* with Christ “because of His great love with which He loved us.”

Ponder for a Moment

What thoughts or feelings of God's great love come to mind when you think of yourself as “together with Christ”?

Day 30



How Do We Love God?

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

Then the righteous will answer Him saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” (Matthew 25:34–40)

Have you ever wondered, How do I love God? How does God want me to show that I love Him? Is it through singing songs of praise? Will He know that I love Him if I obey the Ten Commandments? Does He want me to shout into the sky, “I love You, Lord”?

Jesus’ description of the King and his kingdom answers these questions. God wants us to demonstrate our love for Him by loving others. He accepts our love for others as our love for Him.

The Old Covenant contained two great commandments: “You shall love the LORD your God ...” and “You shall love your neighbor ...” (Matthew 22:37, 39). But Jesus gave us a single command: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Jesus’ command does not mention loving God. Only one command is required because by loving others we are loving God. There is no need for two commands; both are contained in the one.

God is intimately connected to His people. When Saul (who became Paul) was blinded by a bright light on the road to Damascus, Jesus spoke to him, “Saul. Saul. Why are you persecuting *Me*?” (Acts 9:4). After Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, the Lord took the fisherman aside and asked him three times, “Peter, do you love Me.” And each time, after Peter responded, “Yes,” Jesus said, “Feed My lambs.” “Tend My Sheep.” “Feed My sheep” (John 21:15–17).

Jesus is so closely identified—so in union—with His followers that it is as if He is saying, “Every act of kindness you do for another you are actually doing for Me.” “As you care for others, I feel your love.”

Hands-on, human acts of goodness, give us a picture of what heavenly love looks like on earth and they satisfy the heart of God. When you treat others with compassion, you are showing Him

compassion. When you stop for a homeless person, you are stopping for Him. When you feed the hungry (physically or spiritually), you are feeding Him. When you comfort a friend in a difficult place, welcome a stranger or visit one who is sick, you are caring for Him.

God is pleased when you give people the love their soul so desperately desires. When you treat others with loving kindness—as the treasured people they are—they begin to realize they are valued. In loving others, you reveal to them their own inherent beauty and declare to them their own incredible worth. Oh the joy this brings to Jesus.

You, my friend, were created to know God's love and let it pour out of you to others. God gave you your unique place in the world to love those around you. In the wonderful way God made His kingdom, He accepts your love for others as your love for Him.

Ponder for a Moment

Who has God placed in your path to treat with lovingkindness? How might you best care for that person today?

How might it change your attitudes and interactions to realize that in caring for someone, you are caring for Jesus?

Day 31



Christ in You, the Hope of Glory

“God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

“Christ in you, the *hope* of *glory*.” What does it mean?

When we hope for something, we wait for it with eager expectation. We look forward to it with longing hearts. We have hope because of Christ in us.

But what is glory? What are we hoping for?

On Mount Sinai, Moses said to God, “Please show me Your *glory*.” And the Lord replied, “I will make all My *goodness* pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you.” (Exodus 33:18–19). Moses asked to see God’s *glory* and God showed Moses His *goodness*. God’s *glory* and His *goodness* are one and the same. God’s glory is His nature of loving kindness.

After Moses encountered God on Mt Sinai, his face shown with glory. But the glory of the New Covenant is meant to exceed that. “If the ministry of death [the Ten Commandments], written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?” (2 Corinthians 3:7–8). God’s design is that we radiate His goodness that does not pass away.

“Christ *in* you” is the basis for our hope. Our hope begins with God in our spirit. God lives *in* us—*in* our spirit. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are *children* of God” (Romans 8:16). Christ *in* you—the Spirit hidden away in your spirit—is the foundation upon which our hope rests.

But “hope of glory” isn’t meant to be the end point. The actual glory is Christ *through* you. It is Christ in your spirit filling and renewing your soul and flowing out *through* your body for others to experience. The glory manifests when our soul is caught up in knowing and seeing God and our body expresses it for the world to see.

When our soul is permeated with the nature of Christ—when we are led by the Spirit—our body radiates the glory of God. “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are *sons* of God” (Romans 8:14). When our soul comes to rest in agreement with the Spirit, we will be *sons/daughters* of God—fashioned after the image of the firstborn Son. You were made to be like Jesus and resonate with His divine nature.

God gives Himself to you in love so that you might share in His goodness—so that every bit of you is flooded with Him. Glory radiates *through* you when the nature of God—His love, joy, peace and kindness—pours out for the world to see. Glory is the fruit of the Spirit manifested *through* you in hands-on, earthly, relational ways.

Glory was the “clothing” Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden before their covering fell away and they saw that they were naked. This is the glory Jesus paid for on the cross. The Spirit wants to burst forth from you in full, vibrant, abundant life. God’s desire is to be made known and visible to the world *through* you. When your spirit *and* soul are in agreement with Him, the goodness of God—the glory of God—is free to express itself *through* you.

God is glorified when we express His glory. The glory of God is humanity fully alive.

Just think of it. God created you—imperfect, unique, valuable, treasured you—to share His glory with the world. From the inside out—from spirit, to soul, to body—you were designed to radiate the nature of God! God’s glory—God’s lovingkindness—enlivens you and comes forth *through* you. You are God’s chosen vessel to enjoy His goodness and share it with the world.

Ponder for a Moment

For the rest of today, put yourself in Jesus’ sandals. Let His glory—His nature of lovingkindness—express itself through you as you go about your everyday life.

“The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” What do these words mean to you?

Day 32



“Be Perfect”? How?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.... For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43–44, 46–48)

Jesus tells us, “Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” But how can we possibly be perfect like that? Don’t Jesus’ words just set us up for failure? What does He mean?

Webster’s Dictionary defines perfect as “being entirely without fault or defect, flawless ... having excellence in every part ... as in an unattainable state.” The world tells us “perfect” is being at the top of the class. It is breaking the track record each time you run a race. Religion drives us to think “perfect” involves obeying every law in the rulebook.

And so we work hard for good grades. We strive for fast race times. We try to obey the rules, especially the ones we feel are most important. And when we succeed, we are praised. Teachers, coaches, bosses, friends and family give us approval, and we feel valued ... conditionally ... for a time.

But when we inevitably fall short, we feel less-than. How easy it is to believe Satan’s lies that because we don’t achieve some high standard, we are defective and unacceptable.

You and I were not created to be “perfect” in the way the dictionary defines the term. Being “perfect” by the world’s definition is actually a denial of our humanity.

The Greek word for perfect, *teleios*, actually means living out the goal set for each of us by God. *Teleios* is not an end to be reached; it is a way of continual life. It does not imply that we are without sin. Rather *teleios* refers to a condition in which we imperfect, messed-up humans are in ongoing relationship with our perfect Creator.

On the cross, Jesus took our sins and imperfections; we are complete in Him. The Father sees us wrapped in the perfection of His Son. We are perfect when we give up our own striving to be perfect (by the world’s definition) and rest in the perfection of our Savior.

We were not created to live as independent beings. The world and religion say, “I can do it. I can pull myself up to that standard.” Satan said, “*I will exalt my throne above the stars of God*” (Isaiah 14:13).

But our soul—the *I* of us—was created to be led by the Spirit. We were created to say, “O LORD, You are my God. *I will exalt You*. I will praise Your name” (Isaiah 25:1).

Acknowledging Jesus as our Savior—exulting our Lord—gives Him proper place in our lives. Being perfect—living life as God created you to—comes from accepting yourself as you are and living in ongoing surrender and obedience to the perfect One. He welcomes you and cherishes you as you are.

God’s definition of “perfect” is based in His perfect love. He is the source of the love that makes us perfect. Jesus’ love goes beyond loving your neighbor. It blesses those who curse you. It is kind to those who hate you. It prays for the ones who abuse and persecute you. God’s love extends even to your enemies.

It isn’t in you or me to love like that. Maybe a good person could love a neighbor ... but to love an enemy? Only God can do that. You are perfect when you live in Christ and let His love radiate through you to all, including your worst enemy.

Ponder for a Moment

How might you have tried to make yourself “perfect” in the past?

How might embracing God’s definition of “perfect” change your opinion of yourself?

How might it change your opinion of God?

Day 33



Paul's Prayer: To Know the Love of Christ

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:14–19)

What a prayer! Paul knows the One to whom he prays; he feels the Trinity's passion to share God's life of love with us.

Paul bows his knees to the Father and these words gush out. He knows that the answer will flow out of the riches of God's goodness. So he asks that the Spirit strengthen us. From deep inside, the Spirit works to reveal truth and give us understanding.

Growing to know Christ is like a dancing with a lead partner. God leads and we follow. Like a willing dance partner, we don't know what the next step might be but, by faith, we follow His promptings. We trust in what we do not see and move in sync with Him. As we do this the dance that is eternal life unfolds before us.

We express the faith God gives by trusting the Faithful One. We trust that He is who He says He is and we trust that we are who He says we are. By faith we welcome Him to dwell in our hearts and know that we are His born-again children. The dance that is eternal life begins and continues by faith; we trust in His goodness—that He will not fail to lead us in lovingkindness.

God wants each and every one of us to know the fullness of life in fellowship with Him. But we can't know it unless we believe. Expressing the faith God gives—following His lead—is a choice. We have free will. We don't have to let Him be our lead partner.

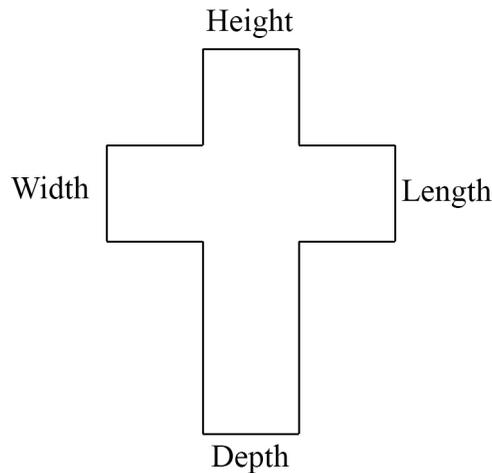
God's love is the firm foundation for our life in Christ. His love is the soil into which our roots sink deep. We are established—we are “rooted and grounded”—in love.

But our knowing God and His love doesn't stop there. Love is like an ocean. You can stand on the shore, wade in the waves or swim out beyond the breakers and experience its beginning, but you can't know its end.

God's love is stronger than we can think or imagine. It is endlessly powerful and good. It doesn't follow the rules of our world. The love of Christ gives without thought of getting. It doesn't love

because; it loves in spite of. It exceeds any definition words can express. Our minds cannot grasp it ... but still you were created to comprehend it in deeply soul-satisfying, relational ways.

“The love of Christ which passes knowledge” has expression in the width, length, depth and height of the cross. Width and length—the stretching wide of Jesus’ arms on the cross to encompass the expanse of the world. Depth—the descent of Jesus leaving heaven, becoming a man and taking our sins with Him to the grave. Height—the ascent of Jesus to the Father where we are seated with Him in heavenly places.



Such love exceeds factual knowledge, but it is here for you and me to know in personal relationship. Experiencing the extravagance of Jesus’ love for us allows us to know the extravagance of the life He has secured for us. Progressively coming to know the riches of Jesus’ love changes you into the image of the One who created you ... until you come to be “filled with all the fullness of God.”

Every bit of Paul’s prayer is God’s desire for you today.

Ponder for a Moment

Read Paul’s prayer again as if you personally are the one Paul is praying for.

Read Paul’s prayer again, this time making it your prayer for someone you know.

Day 34



Sufferings ... Character ... Hope ... Love Poured Out

“Let us exult and triumph in our troubles and rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that pressure and affliction and hardships produce patient and unswerving endurance. And endurance develops maturity of character. And character produces joyful and confident hope of eternal salvation. Such hope never disappoints or deludes or shames us, for God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3–5, AMPC)

“Triumph in our troubles”? “Rejoice in our sufferings”? Why would we do that? When troubles strike—sickness, lawsuits, war, natural disaster, persecution, famine—they unsettle us. Our natural inclination is to avoid hardships, not rejoice in them.

Our souls want peace and rightness ... because we were designed for these things. And so we pray that our difficult circumstances would change, and sometimes they do. But, in the vulnerability of trials—when we do not understand and cannot control the suffering—we have the continual opportunity to trust God ... and find peace and rightness, not in circumstances, but in the assurance of our Father’s love.

Please don’t think for an instant that your problems are signs that God is displeased with you. Problems are not punishments. The enemy may use hardships to tempt you to think that God has forgotten you, but that is not true.

In suffering, we are tested. Do we want God only on our terms—for the “good” we desire? Or will we trust Him regardless of our trials? Will we cling to Him in assurance that, even though we may not understand the reason why He allows the suffering, He is working for the deep, eternal good of the people He loves?

Romans 8:28 says, “All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” When I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, I clung to hope in that Scripture. “All things work together for good,” I told myself. “I will be healed.” “We will become a missionary family.” But my definition of “good” didn’t happen; God had something deeper in mind.

God’s definition of “good” is found in the next verse. “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29).

And slowly I began to see: God works through difficulties and trials of every sort—through *all* things—so that we come to be “conformed to the image of His Son.” “Good” is our character be-

coming like His. “Good” isn’t the absence of external, stressful circumstances; it is the presence of internal rightness with God.

Whatever has happened or is happening, Jesus is right there with us in the midst of the storm. As a human being tested and tried in all ways even as we are, He relates to us in our suffering. Just as a good friend would suffer with you in your hardships, Jesus hurts with you. His heart overflows with empathy and compassion for you. He shares your pain.

Even if you cannot feel His nearness, He is with you. In the Old Testament, we read how Job, in all his sufferings—having lost children and earthly possessions, tortured with sickness and the false counsel of others—had no understanding of the reason for his afflictions and no assurance of the Lord’s presence. Yet Job did not give up on God. I stand in awe of those I know today who, in the face of overwhelming trials, devoid of understanding and of God’s felt presence, refuse to give up on God.

Hold on my friend. Hold on to the hope that does not disappoint. Believe in the good of God. In your suffering, He is molding your character to match His. He will pour His love into your heart. This is His promise to you—His beloved.

Ponder for a Moment

Consider God’s definition of “good” for your life and how it may differ from your own. Record your thoughts.

Can you think of a time when suffering resulted in your knowing God in a deeper way? If so, tell of that time.

Day 35



Living Life in Christ

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

This Scripture sums up how Paul lives life. But what does it mean? What is Paul actually saying?

He begins, “I *have been* crucified with Christ.” Paul knows it has already been done; when Jesus was crucified, he was crucified with Him. When Christ died, Paul’s old/Adam nature died too.

Paul knows the old Paul is dead. He says, “It is no longer I who live.” Although Paul would still have been tempted to think, feel and act like he used to, he is aware that he is dead to the old way of living. No longer is he being led by his independent soul—his mind, will and emotions separated from God. No longer is he held captive to his old way of thinking based on the Old Covenant law.

Paul says, “But Christ lives in me.” He has come into agreement with Someone greater than himself. Now Paul is being led by the Spirit.

Rehabilitating the old nature was not an option for Paul; neither is it an option for us. Religion is forever telling us that we can and should be rehabilitated. It seeks to provide ways that the “good” self might help fix-up or control the “evil” self. But that is not God’s way. The freeing truth is to know that when Christ died, we died too.

In Adam all sinned and fell into the old nature born of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil with the soul in charge. But when Jesus died on the cross, He took our old nature with Him to the grave. And when He rose, we rose with Him in His new nature of life being led by the Spirit. Romans 6:5 says, “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”

Paul encourages, “*Put off* the old man with his deeds, and *put on* the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:9–10). He encourages, “Be renewed in the Spirit of your mind, and ... *put on* the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:23–24).

We believe what God says about our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. We give ourselves to God in faith and let Him lead us in the transforming work He wants to do in and through us. We “put off” and “put on” by welcoming truth and letting God’s thoughts and feelings renew our souls. We “work out [our] salvation” (Philippians 2:12) by letting the life of Christ in

us work its way out for the world to see in our God-given humanity.

But we can't trust someone unless we know they love us. We can live by faith only when we are confident of God's love for us. Paul says, "And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me* and gave Himself for me."

"*Who loved me,*" that is the key. Paul knew Jesus' love deeply and personally.

Life in our new nature hinges on knowing God's love for us. You can't live by faith—you can't give yourself totally to Him for His transforming work—unless you know that He loves you—*you personally*. Love isn't love until it is given away and Jesus gave Himself totally, unreservedly for you. The Son of God died for you to give *you* His full, abundant life.

Ponder for a Moment

What does it mean to you that you have been "crucified with Christ"?

What does it mean to you that your life is now defined by Christ's life in you?

Day 36



Marked by Love

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

It isn't our correct theology about God, having Christian morals or how much time we spend praying that sets us apart. Love for others is our defining mark. “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus' love in us, overflowing to others, marks us as His disciples.

Consider the contrast between being religious and being a disciple of Jesus. The religious leaders of Jesus' day—scribes and Pharisees—didn't care about people. They didn't treat the poor, the widowed or the oppressed with compassion. Rather they heaped guilt and shame upon people by shunning them or pointing out their sins. They burdened people with laws they couldn't obey. They tore down others to elevate themselves.

Jesus did the exact opposite. People mattered to Him. He valued and cherished each unique one. By treating men, women and children—tax collectors, prostitutes and invalids—with care and compassion, He revealed to each their worth as struggling, yet beautiful human beings created in the image of God.

God doesn't love us grudgingly. He doesn't love us because He is good and that is the right thing to do. He is not disgusted with us in some way, but polite enough to hide His displeasure. Jesus sees right and wrong, but He doesn't judge. His love for you is wholehearted, spontaneous, complete. He loves you because you are His treasure. He delights in you.

To be loved like that is what every soul desires. We were created to know it. Deep in the core of each of us, we long to be treated with kindness—to be delighted in—to be valued for who we are.

Love is what we need and love defines us as Jesus' disciples. In the amazing plan of God, when we come to know Jesus' unconditional love for us, we begin to express that same love to others. Knowing Jesus' love allows us to put all judgment aside and simply love. In fact, our love for others is our defining mark; it is evidence we have been with Jesus.

And, in the amazing plan of God, our love for others attracts them to Jesus—the source of love.

Jesus calls us to be His witnesses to the world. He said, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). We fish with His love. Love attracts people to Him because it fulfills the deepest need of every hurting, longing heart.

Jesus' last miracle recorded in Scripture had to do with fishing in this way. John, Peter and several of the other disciples had been fishing all night without a single catch. Jesus appeared on the shore and called out, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat" (John 21:6). They did ... and netted a huge catch.

Later, after breakfast on the shore, Jesus took Peter aside. Three times He asked the disciple, "Do you love Me?" And, after Peter responded, "Yes, Lord," Jesus said, "Feed My lambs." "Tend My sheep." "Feed My sheep" (John 21:15–17).

Three times Peter had denied Jesus and three times Jesus restored the man by reinforcing that he still had a part in God's plan in being a fisher of men—by caring for others.

Do you see it? Jesus is speaking to us. "Fishers of men—disciples of Mine—cast your net on the right side. Fish in a different way. Feed My lambs (physically, emotionally and spiritually). Care for My people (physically, emotionally and spiritually). Lift them up and encourage them with the truth of who they are and who I am. Treasure them as I do. Let them know how much I love them. Let My love, expressed through you, draw people to Me that they might become whole."

My dear brother, my dear sister, love is evidence that you follow the One who is the source of the love we all so desperately need. Radiating God's love is your witness to the world. Your love for one another marks you as a fisher of men—a true disciple of Jesus.

Ponder for a Moment

In what ways might your opinion or judgement of a person have prevented you from loving them?

Who can you celebrate today? Who can you delight in today? Who can you love today?

Day 37



Love Perfected among Us ... in This World

“We have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is so also are we in this world.” (1 John 4:16–17)

Amazing! Incredible! Can we really believe John’s words to us?

“We have *known* and *believed* the love that God has for us.” God is love and He loves us. But unless we *know* that truth—unless we *believe* it—God’s great goodness can’t come to us and change us from the inside out. God’s promises spring from His lovingkindness. *Knowing* and *believing* He loves us extravagantly allows us to embrace the extravagance of the life Jesus purchased for us on the cross.

The fall in the Garden of Eden gave God opportunity to show us the full extent of His love. Would God leave disobedient, sinful Adam and Eve to fend for themselves? Or would He welcome the human race in its blindness? Would He stay with us as we scorned, rejected and despised Him?

Apart from the fall, God would have had no stage upon which to display the depth of His passion for humanity. On the cross, Jesus showed us the full extent of God’s love—poured out on sinners like ourselves.

John was there. With his own ears he heard Jesus’ agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. With his own eyes he witnessed the betrayal of Judas’ kiss, the mocking, spitting crowds, Jesus’ flesh torn open by the whipping. Imagine watching with John as the Son of Man staggered up the hill to Golgotha. Let your ears ring with the pounding of the nails that bound our Savior willingly to the cross. Hear the words from Jesus’ parched lips, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Know and believe the love that God has for you. Our knowing and believing doesn’t change God; He is overflowing with love for us. But our knowing and believing changes us—so that we come into agreement with God, so His life can have expression in and through us. What we know by faith comes alive in flesh and blood—in physical expression—through our lives.

Over and over again, Scripture encourages us to *know* and *believe*. Jesus said, “You shall *know* the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Truth in itself doesn’t make you free; knowing the truth does. He said, “He who *believes* in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). *Believing* in Jesus allows rivers of living water—the life of God—to pour from your heart.

“Love has been perfected among us....” What? How can that be? Isn't God's love already perfect? Yes! God's love, as expressed to us in the giving of His Son, is perfect.

But the word “perfect” implies living out the ongoing goal set for us by God. And the goal of love is that *all* would come to know and share life in Christ. We get the privilege of perfecting Jesus' perfect love by bring it to hands-on, relational fulfillment on earth.

Dear friend, our Father planned that you would be like His Son. The promise is not to be delayed for heaven; it is for your life here and now on earth. You were made to feel and express Jesus' emotions: intense anger with the temple money-lenders, exuberant joy at the success of His disciples, heart-wrenching grief in the Garden of Gethsemane. You were created to think like Jesus who saw every human being as precious and valuable regardless of worldly labels. You were made to know and believe the Father's love for you, to love others with that same love and be like Jesus in this world.

Holy Spirit, give us revelation. Help us in our partial belief. Help us to more fully know the love that God has for us. Perfect Your love in us, through us and among us.

Ponder for a Moment

Read today's verses again. What is God saying to you through these words?

Day 38



One in Glory; One in Love

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them that they may be one just as We are one. I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” (John 17:20–23)

Just before going to the cross, Jesus prays this prayer for us. It is His heartfelt desire for His people—for those 2,000 years ago and for you and me today. Jesus pleads to the Father on our behalf, that we be one with Him—that we join Him in the oneness He shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Our union with Him drives His prayer.

Four times in this part of His prayer, Jesus asks that we “may be one,” just as He is one with the Father. Hours later Jesus paid the price to guarantee fulfillment of this request. Our atonement (at-one-ment) was accomplished on the cross.

Jesus took our sins and our sin nature upon Himself; He made Himself one with us so that when He died, we died. And when He rose, we rose. We share in His resurrection life; we share His divine nature. Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, is both one with His Father and one with His people. He is the bridge that unites us.

The life of God flows *to* us in union with Jesus. In Christ, we become the people God created us to be—“made perfect in one.” Jesus shares Himself with us so intimately, so completely, that His nature becomes ours. His glory becomes ours; the *glory* the Father gave Jesus, is the same *glory* Jesus gives us. His love becomes ours; the *love* of the Father for His Son is the same *love* the Father has for us.

In union with Jesus, the life of God flows *to* you so your life resonates with His and you become your true self—the son or daughter of God He created you to be. And in union with Jesus, the life of God flows *through* you. The life you share with Jesus is what creation longs to experience. That is your witness—“that the world may believe that you sent Me.”

God’s plan for saving the world is not so much about church programs or ministries. It is about His Son on display through His people. It is that simple and that profound. The glory of God—the love of God—bursting out *through* you, is God’s plan for redeeming the world.

But how do we express Christ who lives in us? How do we let God pour out through us for the world to see? How do we manifest God’s lovingkindness to others?

We don't know what the person in front of us really needs. We don't know how they are thinking or the traumas and hurts they have suffered. Do they need food? Shelter? What words would help? If Jesus were here, what would He do to heal the wounds of their spirit, soul and body?

We don't know what they need to feel valued, treasured and loved, but the Spirit knows. He will guide you. Being at one with Jesus means following the Holy Spirit's guidance. He will lead you in caring for others the way Jesus would. At one with Jesus, you can fling wide the windows of your soul and let out His healing goodness.

You in your frail humanity—ordinary, limited you—at one with all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God, is your witness. Creation longs to see Christ on display through you. God shares His glory with you. And so, at one with Jesus, you radiate His nature to others—and the world comes to know and believe that the Father loves us even as He loves His Son.

Ponder for a Moment

Read today's Scripture again. In your own words, what is Jesus' heartfelt desire for you?

In your own words, what is Jesus' heartfelt desire for the world?

Day 39



Come to Me

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

So how do we apply all that we have learned to our lives? What are we to do? How do we come to better express God’s love? How do we become the people He has promised we shall be?

Trying to make life work apart from Christ is a heavy burden we were never meant to carry. Over and over again we simply come with our loads and learn to rest in Him. We come to the One who is kind and approachable—gentle and lowly. We come to the One, who as a humble man acknowledged his absolute dependence on His Father. We come to the One who cannot be deterred in wanting to be with us and give Himself to us.

And so we continue in eternal life as we began—by coming to Jesus. Receiving what He gives is both the *initial gateway* into and the *continuing pathway* for life in Christ. Coming to Jesus, learning from Him and taking His yoke is the way forward into the glorious mysteries, “for eye has not seen, nor ear heard the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Jesus finds pleasure when you receive what He paid the price to give. He never tires of your coming. It saddens Him to see you alone and trying to fend for yourself. No matter who the world says you are or what you have done, He wants you. Jesus isn’t put off by your sins, troubles or partial belief. He doesn’t get frustrated with you after a while and wish you would stop pestering Him. You can’t shut down His passion for your wholeness.

Just as cancer doesn’t put off a surgeon, sin doesn’t put off God. The surgeon is pleased when people come for life-saving operations. The patient’s coming actually allows the doctor to do what he wants to do.

Jesus is so pleased when you come to Him; it lets Him do His healing, transforming work. When you bring yourself to Him, it satisfies His longing for your wholeness. His joy and ours rise together as He gives and we receive.

And so we come to the One who restores our souls and frees us to be the people He created us to be. We come and trust we will hear His voice. Then we come and ask that we will live in obedience to what we have just heard. We say, “I surrender all” and we mean it. And later we pray it again, but this time “all” somehow means more than it did before. We give our life to Him and He takes that life, works Himself into us and gives it back to us to live in oneness with Him.

God grows us, not by making us self-sufficient, but by bringing us to know His sufficiency. Religion and the world are forever suggesting that we need to do something to improve ourselves—to contribute to our growth—to better please God. But it is our coming to God that pleases Him. Think of the father's joy upon the prodigal's return.

We are right with God, not when we get our act together, but when we come in honest acknowledgement that we were never meant to make it on our own—that we need continual care, courage, guidance ... love.

We were made for relationship with our Creator. We were made to live in the stream of God's grace —by letting Him lead in the dance of life. Over and over again, we come to Jesus and accept his invitation to partner with Him in life.

Nothing pleases Jesus more than that you come and receive what He freely gives because in coming and receiving you become your true self—the person He created you to be. He takes your stresses, anxieties and worries and asks you to learn of His gentle and humble ways. He gives rest for your soul as you take His yoke and join in His life.

Ponder for a Moment

Come to Jesus.

Repeat and repeat and repeat

Day 40



Arise! Shine!

“Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people. But the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.” (Isaiah 60:1–2)

“Arise, shine; for your light has come!” Arise in the light of our Father’s adoring gaze. Shine with the knowledge that you are His beloved—treasured, valued, precious and adored.

“The glory of the LORD *has risen upon you*”—not as you hope to be someday, but as you are right now. Our Father shares His glory—His nature of lovingkindness—with you. He created you to be like His Son.

“Darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people.” That darkness will seek to gain a foothold in your soul. Satan is consumed with hatred of all things good—especially the “very good” of you. He will seek to smother God’s glory by twisting your thoughts and destroying your life and witness on earth. As believers, we are in a monumental battle.

But light shines best in total darkness. Through it all the promise remains. “The LORD will arise over *you* and His glory will be seen upon *you*.”

And so, in the confusion and hatred of the world—in famines, pandemics, and wars—we cling to God’s Word. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:35, 37). We cling to God’s promises and know that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. We bring our thoughts into agreement with what God says:

“His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him” (2 Peter 1:3). We will be “filled to all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). “When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). “As He [Jesus] is so also are we in this world” (1 John 3:17). “We *are* more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).

We are more than conquerors by believing God and living out all that He has promised for us. We triumph by bring light into the darkness of our trials and exalting Him above the mountain of our afflictions. In the face of all Satan throws at us, in the darkest circumstances of our lives, we win by laying down our wants and choosing God’s will (God’s way of love) above our own. “Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Jesus did this. And we shall do the same.

Creation longs that we rise and shine in the likeness of God's Son. "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:18–19).

I want to encourage you. You are here, now, in this hour of history to live as the beloved son/daughter of God you were created to be. You are here to resonate with Jesus and radiate His life—His glory—to the world.

I wish I could sit with you and hear your story. I wish I could watch through the words of this devotional and see you overcome the enemy's lies, arise in bold assurance and shine with the goodness of God.

Life on this planet is your opportunity to live out God's will—to bring God's will to earth. God's glory is upon you as you go about your everyday "ordinary" life in the extra ordinary life of God. You are light in the darkness. You are a spirit-soul-body channel of God's love. Our Father manifests His love to the world through His Son, and He manifests His love today, in the chaos and evil of this world, through you.

Ponder for a Moment

"Arise, shine for your light has come!"

How are you personally challenged and encouraged by these words?

May the Holy Spirit strengthen you in the tears and triumphs of the days ahead. May your eyes be opened and your soul restored so that you see our Father as He really is. May Jesus' love fill your heart and pour from you so that all people everywhere are encouraged to come and see that "God is love."

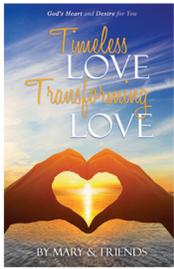
Onward precious beloved. Amen. Amen. And Amen.

More Resources

Website

All of the resources listed below, as well as *40 Days of God's Love*, are available for free download on the JesusOnline Ministries "Forever Loved" website at JesusOnline.com/forever-loved or Forever-Loved.org.

Books

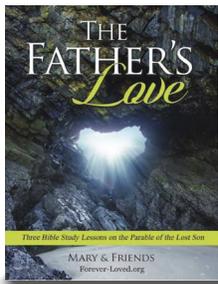


Timeless Love, Transforming Love

God has a story He wants to tell you. It's a love story. And it involves you! This story begins a long time ago and has a consistent theme: the love of the Creator for His creation. Discover the depths of God's love for you. God is love (1 John 4:16) and He created us to have His nature—to share His love.

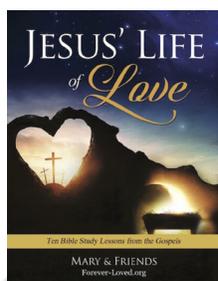
Bible Studies

God created us in His image and gives us His love to share with others. These studies can be used individually or with groups. The questions are designed to encourage you to think deeply and open yourself to more of God's love.



The Father's Love

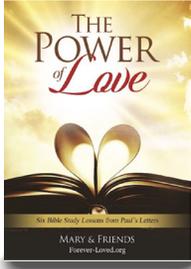
Three Bible Study Lessons on the Lost Son Jesus told the parable of the lost son to help us see our heavenly Father as He really is. Nothing can stop God from loving you. His love for you does not depend upon you behaviors. You are of infinite worth to Him.



Jesus' Life of Love

Ten Bible Study Lessons from the Gospels

Jesus came to earth to show us God's heart of compassion in a way we could understand. He died on the cross so you could know His love, abide in it and love others as He first loved you. God's love sets you free to be the person He created you to be.



The Power of Love

Six Bible Study Lessons from Paul's Letters

Paul's letters overflow with the power and provision of God's unconditional, never-failing love. God treasures you beyond measure. He created you to experience His love, radiate His love and be transformed by His love.

Posters

Be inspired by love insights and Bible verses blended with beautiful imagery. These posters can be downloaded or printed, for your spiritual enrichment or shared with others.

