



LIFTED
BY *love*

**40 DEVOTIONS FOR KNOWING
AND SHOWING THE LOVE OF JESUS**

JOSH SMITH

I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife, Jamielynn. Jamielynn, you have been the primary person God has used to help me know what love is.

Introduction

Life can be hard. Oftentimes, I have been dragged down by the hardships I face in life and feel the need to be lifted up. If this experience resonates with you on any level, then this book is for you. It would be my honor to be able to guide you deep into God's love so that you can be lifted up when life beats you down.

This little book about love is pretty straight forward. It was written with the intention that anyone could read it and grow spiritually, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey. There are forty devotions based on the Bible that cover various topics, but they are all centered on Jesus's love for you.

At the end of each devotion is a daily practice. Each daily practice will guide you to take a practical step of faith. If you want to get the most out of this book, you will want to not just read the devotions to *learn about* God's love, but act on the daily practices so you can *live out* God's love.

I wrote this book because I wholeheartedly believe that the love of God is the most powerful force in the entire universe. Long ago, I decided to place the love of God at the center of my life, and it radically changed my life. I have never regretted receiving Jesus's love into my life. In fact, I have never met someone who genuinely received Jesus's love into their life and later regretted it. My hope and prayer for you is that as you read the pages of this book and act on the daily practices, that you will begin to *personally know* Jesus's love for you and from that place, begin to *broadly show* that same love to others. May you be lifted by the unconditional and unmatched love of God as you interact with the words on these pages!

Much love,
Josh Smith

Day 1

Love Defined

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” -1 John 4:10

Most people say that love is what matters most in life. Our culture is riddled with songs, movies, books, and social media posts that are centered on love. Although love is central in our culture, there is a problem. Most people do not have an accurate definition of love.

If you look up the word “love” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* it defines love as, “A feeling of deep affection.”¹ This definition displays an accurate representation of what most people think love is, but it does not define love as God defines it for us in the Bible. Today, love is primarily defined as a *feeling*. The truth is that love is not a feeling. Now, love can create feelings, but love itself is not a feeling. The lie that love is a feeling has brought incalculable damage into people’s lives.

For example, about half of all marriages in America have ended in divorce for a consistent period of time now. Why is this so? Because love has been defined in an inaccurate way. People give up on their relationships because they no longer felt what they once felt in the beginning. This reality shows exactly why this view of love is so damaging. *Feelings constantly fluctuate*. Feelings tend to not just change day by day but moment by moment too. Therefore, love defined as a feeling only leads to broken relationships with God and others. Defining love as a feeling is a set up for failure.

1 John 4:10 makes it abundantly clear that God’s definition of love is far deeper than just mere feelings. We are told that love is seen most clearly in what Christ did for us on the cross. What did Christ do on the cross? He sacrificed Himself in our place for our sins so that we might be saved from the consequences of our sins and be brought into relationship with God. It is by looking at Christ on the cross that we see the Biblical definition of love. *Love is a sacrificial action done for the benefit of another.*

To put it another way, true love hurts. You know how much a person loves you by how much they are willing to sacrifice for you. Jesus loves you so much that He was willing sacrifice His own life so you could be forgiven forever and adopted into the family of God. That is true love!

What is so incredible about God’s love for us is that not only is it sacrificial, but it takes the first step. It is, *“not that we loved God, but that He loved us.”* Before you were born, God knew you. He knew everything about your greatest gifts and your greatest faults. He saw all your sin and was not driven away by your sin but ran toward you out of love. He ran after you when you ran away from Him. Love takes the first step, even when the other person is running away.

I do not know how you have defined love or how you have seen God in the past. What I do know is who God says He is. He does not just say that He has love for you. Rather, we are told that, “*God is love*” (1 John 4:16b) Since “*God is love*,” you can see and savor the fact that He does not just have love for you, but that His very nature is loving. Your life may constantly change, but His love for you never changes because His character never changes. “*His faithful love endures forever*” (Psalm 136:1b). You may feel unlovable, but God’s love is not dependent upon who you are. It is dependent on who He is. God is love!

Take a moment right now to be lifted by the love of God. By faith, look to Jesus and receive the free gift that is His love. Allow God’s loving arms to wrap around you as a loving Father would hug his own child. Rest in the arms of the God whose love lasts forever.

Daily Practice: Psalm 46:10a says, “*Be still and know that I am God.*” Find a quiet place to sit and be still. Once you have done that, take a few moments to meditate on and rest in God’s unconditional love for you. Do not try to prove anything to God. Just receive and rest.

“Love is a sacrificial action done for the benefit of another.”

Day 2

Love Changes You

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” -Romans 2:4

I’ll never forget the first time I tried to run away from home. I do not remember why I wanted to run away at age seven. What I do remember is packing my backpack with my favorite snacks and shirts before walking down the sidewalk away from my house.

As I was walking down the sidewalk, my dad called my name. He spoke to me in a kind tone and said, “Josh, do you want to play catch one last time before you leave us?” I loved playing catch with my dad, so I agreed. We both put our baseball mitts on and began throwing a baseball back and forth on our front lawn.

After a handful of throws, I began to cry profusely. My dad threw off his baseball mitt and ran across the lawn to give me a big bear hug. He told me that he loved me, and I told him that I did not want to run away from home anymore.

What changed my mind? One minute my bags were packed, and I was ready to run away from home. The next moment I was happy to stay home. What changed my mind was experiencing my father’s love.

If you have been running from God or have been slowly drifting from Him, I can tell you this. The only way your direction will begin to change is if you genuinely experience God's love. Nothing but the love of God can truly change you. That is why Romans 2:4 tells us that His *"kindness is intended to lead you to repentance."*

There are two words that are key in the Romans 2:4 that we must understand if we want our lives to be changed by God's love. Firstly, we must understand repentance. Repentance is a word that normally has a negative meaning in most people's minds. You may think of a screaming preacher on a street corner when you hear the word repent. However, repentance is not a negative word but a positive one in the Bible. To repent simply means to change your mind. *If you want to change your life, you must first begin by changing your mind.* In other words, all life change starts with repentance.

Secondly, we must understand God's kindness towards us. Jesus is more kind than you will ever fully know. That is why Romans 2:4 does not just say God is kind. Rather, we are told of the *"riches"* of His kindness. Meaning, God is never sold out when it comes to the supply of His love for you. You could spend every second of your life contemplating the kindness of God and still not have come close to a complete understanding of it.

God's kindness is seen most clearly on the cross. It is on the cross that He was killed for our sins so that we would not have to be. It is this sacrificial love that draws us near to God even when we have been running away. It is the fact that His arms are always open wide towards us that makes us feel safe to come back home even after we have packed our bags with a plan to leave and never return.

If God's kindness is the key to repentance, then the only way you will ever truly change is if you realize how unconditionally loved you are. So, I want to ask you a question right now.

What is it in your life that needs to change?

Stop trying to change it yourself. You cannot create change within yourself. Only God's love can. Today, you can invite God's love into whatever sin, struggle, or hurt that is holding you back. Allow God's love to lift you up to the place of change that you have not been able to get to on your own.

Daily Practice: Take a moment to pray a prayer of confession. Confess to God the area of your life that needs change and then thank Him for His loving kindness toward you in that area.

"God's kindness is the key to repentance."

Day 3

A Longing for Love

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” -Psalm 42:1-2

Everybody is longing for love. Just as your body longs for water every day, so your soul longs for love. The question is not, “Does your soul long for love?” The question is, “Where are you trying to satisfy your longing for love?”

The problem is that many people are looking for love in all the wrong places. We try to get people to give us the kind of love that only God can supply. Now, there is nothing wrong with receiving love from people. We are not just created for relationship with God but for relationship with others too. However, God’s love is far larger than the love that any person can ever give you. The stomach in your soul that needs love can be *partially filled* with love from others, but it can only be *fully filled* by God’s love. John Mayer expresses this reality well in his song *Something’s Missing* when he says:

Something’s missing
And I don’t know how to fix it
Something’s missing
And I don’t know what it is
No, I don’t know what it is

Something’s different
And I don’t know what it is
No I don’t know what it is

Friends -check-
Money -check-
A well slept -check-
Opposite sex -check-
Guitar -check-
Microphone -check-

As I read those lyrics I want to shout to John Mayer and say, “I know what it is! I know what you are missing! You are missing the love of Jesus!” You see, John Mayer has all the love and fame the world offers, yet he still feels that there is something missing within his soul. A deep longing that has yet to be filled. The longing for love. God’s love.

Whether you know it or not, your soul has been longing for God’s love your entire life. The sad part of the story is that so many people never realize that it is God’s love that their soul is longing for. The result is that they run to everything but God to find love to satisfy their soul. They run to romantic relationships, success in the workplace, wealth, and gaining followers and likes on

social media so that they can experience some form of love and security. The problem is not that any of those things that I just listed are wrong in and of themselves. The problem is that none of it is enough to satisfy our deepest longing for love.

So, I got a few very important questions for you right now. I want you to pause to consider them so you can answer them honestly. Where have you been looking for love? Have you been looking to the love of Jesus to fully satisfy your soul's deepest longings for love, or have you been looking elsewhere?

In John 4 we are told of an encounter that Jesus has with a woman at a well. This woman had been looking for love in all the wrong places. She had been married to five different men and was living with a sixth man without being married to him. She had been looking to romantic relationships to fill her soul's longing for God's love. It clearly was not working well. As Jesus and this woman are standing by a well filled with water He tells her, *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water up to eternal life"* (John 4:13-14).

If you go anywhere other than Jesus to fulfill your soul's longing for love, you will *"thirst again."* You may feel *momentary satisfaction*, but there will be *long term frustration*. Your soul will still be thirsty for God's love. It will always feel like something is missing.

Today, you can come to Christ to find a love that you will not find from anyone else. Only Jesus knows everything about you and still loves you so much that He was willing to die for you. In Jesus you are fully known and fully loved. When you begin to taste and see God's love, your soul will find the satisfaction it has been looking for your whole life. You will begin to know what it means to *"never thirst"* again.

Daily Practice: Take some time to read and reflect on the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well in John 4:1-42. As you do, may God satisfy your soul's longing for love.

"Just as your body longs for water every day, so your soul longs for love."

Day 4

The Weight of Worry

"Worry weighs a person down; an encouraging word cheers a person up." -Proverbs 12:25 (NLT)

We have all felt weighed down by worry at one time or another. In fact, you may feel weighed down by worry right now. Oftentimes, the weight of worry can be so heavy that it is like a weight on the back of our souls that is absolutely crushing.

When I was a kid, I owned an atlas. It was a large and beautiful book that contained pictures of maps from all over the world. I loved geography as a kid, and I still do to this day. On the cover of the book was the picture of a man carrying the world on his shoulders. I didn't know this as a kid, but in Greek Mythology Atlas was a Titan that lost to Zeus in battle and a part of his punishment was to forever carry the heavens on his shoulders.

Maybe you feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Maybe you feel like worry has you so worked up that you do not have any peace in your soul. If that is the case, I got good news for you! *"An encouraging word cheers a person up,"* and Jesus gives us the most encouraging words for those of us that feel weighed down by worry in Matthew 11:28 when He says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

Do you want to get rid of the weight of worry that is crushing you? I have both negative and positive news to tell you that can set you free. Firstly, let's start with the negative news. You cannot carry the weight of worry on your shoulders! You and I are too weak to carry the weight of all the worries that come with the complexity of life. You will never be rid of your burdens by trying to become a stronger person. Even the strongest souls in the world cannot carry the full weight of all their worries on their shoulders. It is a crushing weight that gets the best of us all.

The good news is that there is One who can easily carry all your burdens. His shoulders are stronger than ours. Not only *can* Jesus carry all your burdens, but He *invites* you to bring all your burdens to Him. He promises that if you bring your burdens to Him that He will give you *"rest."* Stop carrying your burdens. Bring your burdens to the feet of Jesus by faith!

Are you burdened by shame from sin? Jesus has already carried all your sin on the cross! Are you burdened by the unknown? Jesus already knows everything that has happened and will happen in the history of the world! Are you burdened by what you cannot control? Jesus is all powerful and nothing comes to pass unless He allows it! Are you burdened by an addiction? Jesus can offer you freedom from whatever it is you feel enslaved by!

Whatever you are most burdened by right now, drop it at the feet of Jesus by faith. You do not have to be weighed down by the worries of this world any longer. You can be lifted by the God who loves you and wants to carry all your burdens for you. His hands have the strength to carry what you cannot carry yourself. When you allow His hands to carry the weight of your worries, you will have rest. As you receive Jesus's gift of rest you will recognize that the same hands that can carry the weight of your worries are the same hands that were pierced with nails on the cross.

Daily Practice: Go to God in prayer with an honest spirit. Share whatever is burdening you with Him and then as an act of faith place your burdens at His feet.

"The same hands that can carry the weight of your worries are the same hands that were pierced with nails on the cross."

Day 5

The Greatest Gift Ever

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast.” -Ephesians 2:8-9

God’s grace is the greatest gift that you could ever receive. Now, what is God’s grace? *Grace is God’s free gift of love and forgiveness in your life.* Grace is the fact that God freely offers you relationship with Him. Grace means God does not treat you according to your sins, but according to His love. God’s grace is greater than all your sins combined. Grace is the fact that when you ran away from God, He ran after you. Grace is the fact that you do not and cannot earn God’s love for you but can only simply receive it.

Since grace is the greatest gift ever, it is vital that you know how to receive it. The way you receive it is by faith. To have faith is to trust. Trusting in any person means that you have confidence in that person. For example, if you are riding on an airplane, that means that you are trusting the pilot to fly you safely from where you were to where you want to go. The truth is that you trust people all the time. Take the same trust you put in a pilot or any other person and place it in Jesus. You can place your faith in the fact that Jesus died for your sins on the cross, was buried, and rose again three days later so that you could have a renewed relationship with Him. Jesus is the most trustworthy person in the universe. There is no one that will ever be more graceful toward you. He bled and died for you because of His great love for you. You can trust someone that not only loves you unconditionally but is the Creator and King of the universe. When you place your faith in Jesus, you *“will be saved”* from your sins and made right with God (Romans 10:9b). It is a promise, not a probability!

I want you to notice that you are not saved *by faith*. You are saved *by grace through faith*. Meaning, you are not saved by the size of your faith but by the size of God’s grace. You may think you can only muster a small amount of faith in this moment, but do not worry about that for a second. Take whatever small faith you can muster in this moment and place it in Jesus. Any amount of genuine faith will allow you to receive the greatest gift ever given that is God’s grace.

To be clear, just because you know about God’s grace does not mean you have received God’s grace by faith. Let me put it this way. If you had a deadly disease that could only be cured by a certain shot, you would want to receive that shot so you could be healed. The medicine in the shot could heal you but without the needle penetrating your body, the medicine would not be able to get into your body and allow the needed healing to take place. Sin is a fatal disease that ends in death. The good news is that God’s grace is the medicine that can heal this deadly disease. However, you cannot be healed by the medicine of God’s grace if it has not been injected into your soul. You need the needle of faith to penetrate your heart so you can be healed. You see, you can have medicine in the room, but it is useless until the needle injects the medicine into your body. So it is with God’s grace. God’s grace will be completely useless to you if you do not put your trust and confidence in Jesus. Do not settle for just knowing about God’s grace. Begin to personally know the grace of God by faith.

Imagine that I offered you a brand-new mansion for free. If you said “no” to that offer, you would be crazy to say the least. Now, if you did say “no” I could do nothing about it. I could not force you to accept the gift. In the same way, God created us as free beings because He created us for a love relationship with Him. He does not force you or anyone else to receive His grace by faith. Right now, He is offering you His grace and is asking you to receive it by faith so that you can be saved. You would never turn down the gift of a brand-new mansion, which is a temporary building that will eventually rot and breakdown. You should not turn down the greatest gift ever, a renewed relationship with God that will last forever. Today, you can come to Christ by faith and receive the greatest gift ever!

Daily Practice: If you are ready, you can receive God’s grace by faith right now. You can say something like this to God in a prayer: *“Jesus, thank you for dying and rising again for my sins. Today, I am placing my faith in you. I am turning from my old life and beginning the adventure of following you. May your love for me and my love for you always be at the center of my life. Amen.”*

If you just prayed that prayer as a way to say that you have placed your faith in Jesus, you are now in the family of God as a child of God! Welcome to the family! Receiving God’s grace by faith is the greatest choice you will ever make in life. My hope is that the rest of this devotional will encourage you to grow deeper in your new relationship with Jesus. In addition to finishing this book, it is vital that you join a Christ-centered and Bible believing church so you can continue to grow in your newfound faith. On this new journey you are on there will be bumps in the road, but God will be forever faithful to you, so you can always confidently put your faith in Him.

“Grace is God’s free gift of love and forgiveness in your life.”

Day 6

The Grip of God

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hand.” -John 10:27-29

One of my biggest heroes in life growing up was my grandpa. He showed up to every event in my life. He was never on time, because in his book to be on time is to be late. He was always early because he always cared. He worked with his hands most of his life as a plumber and eventually became an inspector for the City of San Jose. He always seemed larger than life to me since he stood 6’4” tall and was the toughest man I had ever met in my life.

When I was a kid, he would often tickle me. He would tickle me so aggressively to the point where it would begin to hurt because I was laughing so loudly. I would often try my best to wrestle myself out of his strong grip, but it never worked. His grip was always too strong for me to break loose.

My grandpa's grip was strong, but God's grip is the strongest of them all. That is why Jesus declares that our Heavenly Father *"is greater than all; no one can snatch them [believers] out of my Father's hand."* No one can snatch you out of God's hands once you become His child through faith in Jesus. Even you cannot wrestle your way out of God's hands. The grip of God is stronger than the power of your sin. Once you have placed your faith in Jesus, you are saved, and your eternal destiny is secure!

God is not a Father that wants His children to live in constant fear over whether they are in the family of God or not. God wants you to confidently know that once you are in the family of God, your place in the family is firmly set in stone. Nothing in this world, not even the devil himself can pry you out of the strong and loving hands of your Heavenly Father.

The problem is that many of us doubt our standing with God, because of where our focus lies. Rather than focusing on the grip of God, we focus on our own shortcomings. Remember, the reason why God adopted you into His family in the first place had nothing to do with your goodness. He adopted you because He loves you and desires a deep relationship with you. Your goodness was never the reason why you started being a member in the family, and it is not the reason why you stay in the family. You get to stay in the family of God forever because God's grip on your soul is stronger than anything or anyone else. Today, you can be at rest in your soul knowing that you are in the hands of a God that is not just all-powerful, but all-loving.

Daily Practice: For further study and reflection, read all of John 10. It a very powerful passage of Scripture!

"Once you are in the family of God, your place in the family is firmly set in stone."

Day 7

Defined By Love

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" -1 John 3:1a

On Day 1 of this devotional, I wanted to start out by defining love for you. Now, we must look to the equally important subject of allowing love to define you.

Conversation about identity is at the center of our culture right now. Many people are concerned about how they should define themselves. The problem is that we are asking the wrong question. The question is not, "How should I define myself?" The question is, "How does God define me?" Only the creator of an object has the authority to define the object they created. Think about it like this. I cannot rename the iPhone to the joshPhone because I didn't create it. Steve Jobs did.

God is your Creator, and He is the only one who can truly define you. He is where you must look to discover your true identity. If you try to look within to discover your identity you will only find conflicting emotions which will result in confusion. *If you look to Christ, you will find clarity about your identity.*

There are only two identities to choose from for every human being. You are either a spiritual orphan or a child of God.

Since our sin separates us from God, everyone is born a spiritual orphan. Everyone is born with the need for spiritual adoption. The good news is that Jesus left heaven and came to earth so that we could no longer be defined as spiritual orphans. He chased after us so we could be adopted into the family of God forever. John 1:12 declares, *"Yet to all who did receive Him, [Jesus] to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."*

In many orphanages the cutest and youngest babies are often adopted first. Why? Because they don't have a lot of baggage. Adopting a rebellious teenager from a rough background is completely different from adopting a baby with a blank slate. In many cases, the most attractive children are often accepted while the least attractive and oldest children are often rejected. This is not so with our Heavenly Father.

God loves everyone in the world, including you. He desires and invites everyone to join His family. When it comes to being adopted by God it is not about who has done the best or looks the best. There is not a child that the Father does not passionately desire to be in His family. The question is not, "Does God want me in His family?" The question is, "Do you want to be in His family?" All you must do to be adopted is to believe in and receive Jesus. The moment you do that, you instantly become a child of God, no matter who you are or what you have done.

Once you place your faith in Jesus to save you from your sins, you become a child of God. It is who you are. Being a child of God is now what defines you. God's love has been lavished on you. Meaning, He does not just give you a little bit of love, but He gives you far much more love than you could ever fully imagine. You are His child!

I became a father last year, and my daughter Ariella has completely captured my heart. It does not matter if she is crying, smiling, sleeping, or yelling at me. No matter what state she is in, my love remains the same for her because she is my child. There is nothing that she could ever do that would change my love for her. Nothing. If that is how much love I have for my child as an imperfect man, just imagine how much God loves you as the only perfect Heavenly Father.

Today, you can recognize and receive God's love by faith. Do not let anyone or anything else define you. Once you do that, when you look in the mirror, you are looking at a child of God. It is who you are!

Daily Practice: Take a moment to reflect on how you have defined yourself in the past. Then confess to God in prayer how you have falsely defined yourself and ask Him to help you stand strong in your identity as His beloved child. Once you are done praying begin repeating phrase, "I am a child of God!" out loud until you feel it begin to shape your soul.

"If you look to Christ, you will find clarity about your identity."

Day 8

Getting Past Your Past

*"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."
-Philippians 3:13b*

There is a reason why your rearview mirror is so small, and your windshield is so big. When you are driving you are meant to look forward most of the time. It is the same in life!

Imagine with me for a moment that you tried to drive on the freeway while only looking at your rearview mirror. How would that turn out? Not very well! You would hurt yourself and others. Unfortunately, that is how many of us live our lives. We are constantly obsessing over and replaying the shortcomings in our past. They repeat over and over again in our minds and the result is spiritual, relational, and emotional wreckage.

If you don't want your past to ruin your present any longer, you must begin, "*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.*" Now, Paul is not talking about a delusional way of forgetting about your past. Certainly, there are times it can be important to look back so you can learn lessons from your past. However, I have found that we can often suffer from a *paralysis* that comes from an *over analysis* of the past.

God wants you to learn from your past, but He does not want you to live in it. God wants you to focus on the future that He has planned for you. He has a great plan for your life! He has plenty of "*good works*" that He has "*prepared in advance*" for you to do (Ephesians 2:10). Even more importantly, He has secured for you a home in heaven for you by His grace if you have placed your faith in Jesus. If you know Jesus or begin to place your faith in Jesus, you will be secured the brightest future anyone could ever hope for. You have a future that involves you being eternally secure in the loving and powerful hands of your Heavenly Father.

Today, you can stop letting the worries about your past weigh you down. Rest in the reality of God's forgiveness and move forward. When you do that, you will find yourself living out the future that your loving Father has planned for your life.

Daily Practice: Read all of Philippians 3 for further reflection and study.

"God wants you to focus on the future that He has planned for you."

Day 9

The Home for God's Love

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." -John 15:9 (ESV)

When Jesus was baptized at the start of His earthly ministry, the Father's voice proclaimed from the heights of heaven, *"This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17). The Father had all the reason in the world to call Jesus *"beloved"* and to be *"well pleased"* with Him. Jesus lived a completely perfect life. Jesus is the most lovable person that has ever lived. Yet, Jesus tells us a stunning truth in John 15. We are told that He loves us just as the Father loves Him. How can this be?

Unlike Jesus, we are not perfect. We are not always the most lovable people. We have all said, done, and thought things that make us quite unlovable. Still, Jesus loves you just as the Father loves Him. He can do this because of His work on the cross. When you place your faith in Jesus you are no longer defined by your sin, but by your Savior! That is why 1 Corinthians 5:21 declares, *"God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."* When you place your faith in Jesus, God does not look at you through the lens of your sin, but through the lens of the perfect life of Christ. Because of this truth, Jesus can love you as the Father loves Him. Because of Christ you are now God's beloved child that He is well pleased with. You do not have to prove anything to God. You are His beloved child, and there is nothing you can do to change that truth.

Now, God's love for you will never change. However, your awareness of His love can change. Too often we are easily distracted by all the pleasures, pursuits, and people in our life to the point where we begin to forget about God's love for us. That is why right after Jesus tells us of the magnitude of His love for us, He gently tells us to *"abide"* in His love.

An abode is a home. It is not a place you pass through from time to time. It is where you live. It is where you sleep. It is the place that is most familiar to you. So it is to be with God's love in your life! To abide in God's love is to make His love your abode. You were created to make God's love the home in which your heart dwells. God's love is not something you only let pass

through your mind from time to time. Rather, God's love is to be the very place where the center of your being resides and rests in.

Today, you can abide in God's love. You can remember and rest in the fact that Jesus loves you like the Father loves Him. Do not let your mind become too preoccupied with all that is going on around you. Let God's love take the centerstage of your heart. *Your heart is the home His love is meant to live in.* Let God's love settle into the home where it belongs. Live loved.

Daily Practice: Go out into your day making God's love your abode. Attempt to be aware of His loving presence of every second of the day. There will be moments when you forget He is there, but do not worry. Whenever you turn back to Him, you will realize He has been there the whole time, waiting for you with arms of love wide open.

"You were created to make God's love the home in which your heart dwells."

Day 10

Dodging the Devil's Darts

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Then the devil took him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" -Matthew 4:1-6

One of my favorite games growing up was dodgeball. I was never the biggest or fastest kid in my P.E. class. I was normally one of the shortest and skinniest. This was to my advantage in dodgeball. I was not an easy target to hit because there was not much to hit.

In dodgeball you obviously must dodge balls that are being thrown at you. If you get hit, you are out. The truth is that we have a spiritual enemy called the devil who is constantly throwing darts at us that we must dodge. If we do not dodge them, it can be deadly.

When Jesus walked the earth, the devil threw darts at Him as well. The story in Matthew 4:1-6 shows us how Jesus successfully dodged the darts of the devil. When we look at how Jesus dodged the darts, it shows us how we too can dodge the darts.

Firstly, it is important to note when the devil decides to tempt Jesus. It is *"after [Jesus was] fasting forty days and forty nights."* Is this an accident? Of course not! The devil is wanting to attack Jesus spiritually when He is most weak physically. He will do the same with you.

The devil will wait for an opportune moment to strike. He is not an inexperienced adversary. Far from it. He knows when you are at your weakest and will strike when you are most vulnerable. Therefore, you must know what your weaknesses are and when you are typically at your weakest, for the devil will attack you in those areas and moments. If you want to be able to dodge his darts, it is important to anticipate when he will strike so you will be prepared for the attack. You are a lot less likely to lose the battle when you expect to be attacked versus being surprised by the attack.

Once the devil realizes Jesus is weak physically, he attacks His identity. Notice that the first words out of the devil's mouth are, "*if you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*" Notice, the devil doesn't say, "*You are the Son of God.*" No, he says, "*if you are the Son of God.*" He is questioning Jesus' identity. He will do the same to you.

It is in the moment when your identity as a child of God is questioned that you must stand firm! When the devil brings up your sins, doubts, and regrets, you must claim Christ. You must remember the words of 1 John 3:1a that declare, "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*" Declare your identity in Christ to the devil when he tries to question who you are. Declare that by faith in Christ you have been freely forgiven and brought into the family of God. You are not a spiritual orphan, but you have a new identity as a child of God. No lie from the devil can make your identity die. Once you are a child of God, you are always a child of God, so do not listen to His lies.

After the devil questions Jesus' identity, he distorts God's word. The devil misquoted and misapplied Scripture when he said, "*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'*"

I want you to know this: the devil knows the Bible better than you do. He has been studying it for thousands of years. The difference is that although the devil knows more than you about the Bible, he does not choose to follow it. He rebels against God's truth. Even more destructively, he deceptively uses Scripture to draw people away from God by misapplying and misrepresenting it. Today there are many false teachers who call themselves pastors when in reality they are tools of the first false teacher, the devil.

Experts in currency can tell the difference between a counterfeit one-hundred-dollar-bill and a real one not by studying the thousands of fakes but by studying the one real version. The same is true about God's word. If you want to dodge the darts of the devil's deception when he misuses Scripture, you must rigorously study God's word. The more familiar you are with God's word the easier it will be to know when it is being misused.

Darts will be thrown at you by the devil. The good news is that there is one person who successfully dodged all the darts. Jesus never sinned and died for our sins on the cross for all the times we have and will fall into the devil's schemes. Because of love, Jesus has rescued you from the power of your sin and the devil so you can rest in your secured identity as a beloved child of God.

Daily Practice: Take some time to pray by asking God to give you the strength to overcome the devil's schemes in your life. If there is a sin that you have fallen into, feel free to confess it, and then celebrate in your identity as a child of God.

"When the devil brings up your sins, doubts, and regrets, you must claim Christ!"

Day 11

The Limitless Nature of Love

"I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." -Ephesians 3:16-19

My prayer for you as I have written this small book is modeled after the Apostle Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church. My prayer is that you would be lifted up by God's love through truly knowing the limitless nature of His love for you.

In Paul's prayer we see that God's love is so *"wide and long and deep,"* that it *"surpasses knowledge."* Meaning, God's love is so limitless in its nature that you cannot fully understand it with your human brain. You need the *"His Spirit"* to help you even begin to know God's love in a personal way.

If you spent every second of every day for the rest of your life dedicated to discovering God's love for you, you would still have much uncovered ground at the end of your life. There are some depths of the ocean that have yet to be explored on our small planet. God's love for you is so much deeper than the deepest depths of the ocean. His love is so much deeper than you will ever fully know.

You and I were made to last forever but have not always existed. There was a time when we did not exist and were created by God. But God has always existed and always will exist, so His love for you will last forever. His love for you was around before you were even born. It is more long-lasting than you will ever fully know.

As a kid I would often ask my parents how much they loved me. They would respond by widening their arms and proclaiming, "I love you THIS much." God's arms are so wide that when He stretches them out to show you how much He loves you, you cannot even trace the end of His arms. God's love for you is so much wider than you will ever fully know.

There is not a sin that could sink you so deep that God's love could not meet you there. There is no distance you can run that is too far for the love of God. There is no chasm that cannot be crossed by God's love. His love for you is limitless. People might put limits on their love for you, but God will never have any limit to His love for you.

If you ever doubt the limitless nature of God's love towards you, look to the cross. On the cross you see Christ dying in your place for your sins. On the cross you see Christ's hands and feet nailed to a tree with the weight of your sins on His shoulders, and why? Because of love. Christ was not forced to go the cross but chose to go to the cross. He loves you so much that He'd rather die on the cross than live an eternity without you. This is not because He *needs* you but because He *wants* a relationship with you. It is because of His limitless love.

Although there are no limits to God's love, He will never force you to receive His love by faith. When I proposed to my wife Jamie and asked her to marry me, she had a chance to say "yes" or "no." God does the same with you. He simply offers His hand of love to you. All you must do is grasp that hand by faith. Today, you can begin to grasp how wide, and long, and deep God's limitless love is for you.

Daily Practice: 1 John 4:7-21 is one the strongest sections in the Bible on love. Take some time to read and reflect on this chapter that tells us about the limitless love of God.

"There is no distance you can run that is too far for the love of God."

Day 12

The Power of Love

"For I am convinced that neither life nor death, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." -Romans 8:38-39

The power of Jesus' love for you is unbreakable. It is unshakeable. Yes, there are many powerful foes in this world that try to strip you away from His love, but none of them can stand against the power of His love.

Death is a formidable foe that all must face and many fear. Yet even death is no match for the love of God. Through faith in Christ, death becomes the doorway you walk through to see the Lord's love more clearly than ever before. Death is the final step you take before you see the

loving face of God. For the believer, death does not separate you from God's love, rather it sends you even deeper into love's arms.

Angels and demons are powerful spiritual beings. Yet even they cannot separate you from God's great love for you. God is the Creator of all spiritual beings and none of them can separate His children from His arms. There is no trick, temptation, or trial the devil can bring that can change God's mind about you. You are deeply loved, and no demon can change that fact.

The present can be filled with trials and the future filled with the unknown. Yet neither of these can separate you from the unconditional love of God. The present and the future cannot possess anything that can change God's love for you. It does not matter what you are going through or will go through. God's love will always remain the same.

It does not matter how high you travel or how deep you descend. There is no place you can run on this planet that takes you outside of God's loving reach. You may run as far and as hard as you can, but God's love covers every inch of this planet. It follows you everywhere you go.

Just in case you are not yet convinced about the power of God's love, there is one more foe listed in Romans 8 that is conquered like all the others. This foe is *"anything else in all creation."* God wants you to hear this message crystal clear. There is NOTHING that can *"separate [you] from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!"* There is not a single person, place, or thing that can separate you from God's love. Nothing in this world can break the power of God's great love for you. Not even your worst sins.

Today, you can give up trying to become lovable. Instead, you can begin to rest in the power of God's unconditional love for you. His love for you is not based on who you are but on who He is. There is nothing and no one who can separate you from His love, so begin to live loved today.

Daily Practice: Romans 8 is one of the greatest chapters in the whole Bible. Take time to read and reflect on the whole chapter for further growth in understanding God's love for you.

"There is not a single person, place, or thing that can separate you from God's love."

Day 13

Having Faith When Life Falls Apart

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; and great is your faithfulness." -Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV)

"I am choosing to trust God during this time of suffering."

I have heard so many followers of Jesus utter that statement while going through some of the worst suffering imaginable.

I heard a man say it after he was diagnosed with brain cancer. I heard a woman say it right after she unexpectedly lost her unborn child due to a miscarriage. I heard a married couple say it right after their adult son killed himself with a gun. I could give example after example of followers of Jesus that chose to place their faith in Jesus even when their life was falling apart.

The question is: Why?

You can have faith in Jesus when life is falling apart because He is always faithful.

In fact, He is not faithful to us in a small way. God's word tells us His faithfulness towards us is "*great!*" This proclamation about the greatness of God's faithfulness is particularly powerful when you consider the context in which it was written.

Lamentations was likely written by the prophet of Jeremiah while his nation was being brutally attacked and conquered. Families were torn apart. Children were slaughtered. It was not a minor trial, but a major one. Jeremiah was not standing strong in his faith because his life had no problems. He was praising God because He was faithful even when life was falling apart!

God's faithfulness to you does not mean that everything in your life here on earth will be easy. *Rather, God's faithfulness has more to do with the consistency of His character than the consistency of your circumstances.* Let me give you a handful of practical examples of God's faithfulness:

- When a friend or family member stops loving you, God will never stop loving you.
- When your health fails, God will not rescind His promise to fully heal you in Heaven.
- When you run out of work, God will continue to work all things together for good (Rom. 8:28).
- When you lose your house, God will continue to be your safe shelter that you can run to.
- When you feel completely alone, God will continue to be near to you through His Spirit.

Each day may bring new tests and trials that have the potential to rob you of all joy. However, you can be rest assured that God's mercies "*are new every morning!*" God knows all the tests and trials you will face, which means that all the mercies He makes available to you every day are more than enough for you to overcome whatever you will face. If it is a sin that you fall into, God has given you new mercies for that sin. If it is a temptation you need the strength to overcome, God has given you new mercies to defeat it. Whatever may come your way each day, there are new mercies available for you because great is His faithfulness to you.

Unfortunately, so many people never fully enjoy the faithfulness of God because of their lack of faith in Him. Do not let that be your story too. Today, you can confidently place your faith in

Jesus, even when your life seems to be falling apart because great is His faithful love towards you!

Daily Practice: Take some time to play the famous hymn *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. As the song plays, feel free to respond in whatever way seems best to you. Feel free to sing, sit in silence, or whatever else God leads you to do.

“God’s faithfulness has more to do with the consistency of His character than the consistency of your circumstances.”

Day 14

Love and Lust

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” -1 John 2:15-17

What the world often calls love is not real love. It is lust disguising itself as love. Love is a sacrificial action done for the benefit of another. Lust is a selfish and sexual action done for temporary pleasure. Today, many couples are not truly in love but are in lust with one another.

Living in lust is tempting because acting out in sexual sin feels good. If it did not feel good, nobody would ever do it. The problem is that the good feelings are only temporary. *“The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”* The sin that feels good in the moment ultimately leads to death in this life and the life to come. However, living a life for God leads to eternal life.

So, here is an important question for you to consider: What do you love more, lust or God?

I will be honest with you because I love you. Many people struggle with sexual addictions because they love lust more than they love. Lust is one of the biggest idols in our world. That is why most movies, music, advertisements, and TV shows are all sexualized. Most forms of media are sexualized because sex has become idolized. Many think that having a romantic relationship with the right person will lead to personal fulfillment. It will not. They will eventually fall short of your lofty expectations. Trust me, I know. I fail my wife every day! There is only one person who you can have a relationship with that will give you lasting fulfillment. His name is Jesus.

Now, I do not bring up the topic of lust to shame you over your past or present sin. For the majority of my high school and college years, I struggled with sexual sin. I felt so much shame over how pornography seemed to have a death grip on my soul. 1 John 2:15-17 was a key passage for me during those years. I remember regularly crying over my sin and crying out to God on my knees, asking Him to not only forgive me but to make me love Him more. After years of prayer, counseling, and being humbled by God, I was healed. I no longer struggle with falling into lust as I once did. Why? Over time, God taught me how love is better than lust.

You see, every time you fall into lustful thoughts or actions it is because you have believed a lie. This is the lie: the temporary pleasure of lust will bring you more pleasure than receiving God's love. This lie could not be further from the truth! Psalm 63:3 proclaims that God's love is *"better than life."* There is nothing in this world that is better than God's love! The pleasures of lust are temporary. God's love lasts forever!

The pleasures of lust lead to broken human relationships. God's love allows you to be reconciled to Himself and others. The pleasures of lust can cause disease. God's love brings you healing. The pleasures of lust cause you to treat yourself and others like animals. God's love reminds you that everyone is made in the image of God. The pleasures of lust lead to brokenness. God's love leads to wholeness.

When you experience how much better God's love is than lust, you will stop falling into lust. The key to defeating the battle of sexual sin is not for you to try harder to be better. It is to receive and rest in the love of God. The more you do that, the more you will learn to love God back with every part of who you are. Today, you can begin to love God more than you love lust. Start with His love for you and then work your way to loving Him and others too, and in time, your lust will get lost.

Daily Practice: Psalm 51 is a prayer David prayed after committing murder and adultery. Whether you are struggling with lust right now or not, take time to read that prayer and allow it to guide your prayer life today. It is a powerful prayer.

"What do you love more, lust or God?"

Day 15

Defeating Discouragement

"Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again my Savior and my God!" -Psalm 42:11 (NLT)

We have all had times when we felt defeated by discouragement. We have all been discouraged for different reasons. Everyone has experienced it.

Maybe it is a never ending financial or legal battle. Maybe it is a battle in a relationship with someone that you just cannot seem to get on the same page with. Maybe it is a chronic health issue that just never seems to stop. Maybe it is an emotional battle.

Whatever battle you are fighting, it is easy to get worn out and lose all courage. This is the very definition of discouragement. It is to lose all courage and cease fighting the good fight of faith.

In Psalm 42 we are given an inside look at someone who is fighting against discouragement. They overcome the enemy of discouragement, but it is not without great struggle. The Psalmist cried out to God by saying: *“Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?”*

The person praying here is clearly very discouraged and may even be depressed as well. However, they overcome their discouragement and depression. The question is: How do they defeat discouragement rather than letting discouragement defeat them?

It is quite simple. They learned how to talk to themselves. Surprised? Let me explain to you by sharing a quote from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who spoke powerfully on this passage. He says,

Have you realized that most of your happiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? ...Now this man’s treatment (in Psalm 42) was this: ‘Why are thou cast down, O my soul? He asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So, he stands up and says, ‘Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you’.²

Now, what does the Psalmist talk to himself about while he is discouraged? He talks to himself about the hope that comes from having a personal relationship with the Savior of the world. He says, *“I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again my Savior and my God!”*

As Lloyd-Jones so brilliantly put it, you must stop “listening” to your thoughts. Instead, talk to yourself about how you have been saved through the grace and love of Jesus. Remind yourself of the hope that comes from being forgiven forever. Remind yourself of the hope of always having God with you through the Holy Spirit’s presence. Remind yourself of the hope of heaven.

When you start talking to yourself about the love of God, rather than listening to yourself, you will find yourself being able to defeat discouragement. Today, you can defeat discouragement instead of being defeated by discouragement by beginning to preach to yourself about the unconditional love of God.

Daily Practice: Take time to talk to yourself right now. Talk to yourself about who you are in Christ and who Christ is to you. It might feel weird at first, but it works.

² Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (2016). *Spiritual depression: Its causes and cures*. Zondervan.

“Remind yourself of the hope of always having God with you through the Holy Spirit’s presence.”

Day 16

Love Runs

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’” -Luke 15:4-6

As I was about to write this morning, I was holding my nearly 9-month-old daughter. Ariella is at the age where she still loves to cuddle. However, she is also old enough to clearly express her emotions. In fact, as I was holding her this morning, she was upset with me for whatever reason, so she pushed me away.

When Ariella pushed me away, it did not create a desire in my heart to want to run away from her. Rather, it was in that moment that I wanted to go toward her all the more. You see, I love my daughter very deeply. In the moments when she does not understand or accept my love, it does not change my love for her. If anything, it is in the moments when she is running away that an opportunity is created for me to display how deep my love is for her.

In the moments when you run away from God, He does not consider running away from you. You can never do anything to make Him *stop* loving you, because you never did anything to make Him *start* loving you. God is a running God. He does not stand still when you run away. Rather, He runs after you just as any Father would run after a lost child that they love.

That is why Jesus tells a parable about a sheep that runs away in Luke 15. It is a parable that reveals His heart towards you when you run away from Him. We are told that rather than staying with the ninety-nine sheep that remained and did not run away, He runs after the one sheep that ran away. God’s heart is for those who are lost.

Now, we often like to think that we are not the type of people who get lost. We like to think we have it all together and do not need anyone’s help, not even God’s help. However, that is far from the truth. I think the old hymn *Come Thou Fount* has it right when it says,

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love.*

We all have wandered away from God in the past and tend to continue to do it from time to time. It does not make sense, but we do it anyway. We all run to different places, to find pleasure in life when true pleasure is only found in the presence of God (Psalm 16:11).

Not only do we find the most pleasure and joy from being in God's presence, but God feels the same way about us. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, we are told that not only does he, "*joyfully put it on his shoulders and go home,*" but he also, "*calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'*" God not only gives you joy by being in His presence, but He gets joy out of being in your presence. Like a good and loving Father, He just enjoys getting to be with you.

No matter what you are going through today, remember that love runs. Because "*God is love,*" He always runs after you when you run away. In the moments when you find that reality hard to believe, look to the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus ran after you by leaving heaven to go to earth so He could die for your sins and defeat death three days later. That is how far He is willing to run after you! There is no distance too far, nor any pace that is too fast for this loving Father who keeps running after His lost children.

Daily Practice: Read all of Luke 15. Afterwards, take some time to reflect on whatever truths stood out to you.

"You can never do anything to make Him stop loving you, because you never did anything to make Him start loving you."

Day 17

Love That is Better Than Life

"Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You." -Psalm 63:3

God's love is so much better than life! Here are some reasons why God's love is so much better than life:

Life can be unpredictable, but God's love is faithful.

Life can make you feel burdened, but God's love lightens your burden.

Life can sideswipe you with suffering, but God's love shows you that Jesus suffered on the cross for you.

Life can be filled with temporary pleasures, but God's love lasts forever.

Life can surround you with imperfect people who try their best to love you, but God's love surrounds you with the only person who can love you perfectly.

Once you realize how much better God's love is than life, your lips will naturally glorify God. You can glorify God with your lips by both singing and sharing.

You can glorify God with your lips by simply singing songs of thankfulness to God. Singing to God is not an activity reserved for Sunday worship. Singing is the natural response of any heart that has been warmed by the love of God.

You can glorify God with your lips by sharing God's love with other people. Verbally sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with people is not an activity reserved for pastors, speakers, and extroverts. Telling people about the great love of God is what every follower of Jesus naturally does when they have truly tasted and seen God's love. Think about it like this...

I do not know about you, but when I go see a movie I really like, I tell other people about it. Especially my friends and family members. Since I enjoyed the movie, I want those in my life to enjoy it too. In the same way, when you truly know what it means for God's love to be better than life, your lips will naturally glorify God. Glorifying God with your lips is not a legalistic exercise you must force yourself to do but is simply the result of knowing you are deeply loved.

Today, you can experience the love that is better than life and begin to glorify God with your lips by singing and sharing.

Daily Practice: Because of God's great love for you, glorify Him with your lips today by telling someone how much Jesus loves them.

"Once you realize how much better God's love is than life, your lips will naturally glorify God."

Day 18

What To Do with a Broken Heart

*"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God will not despise."
-Psalm 51:16-17 (A part of a prayer written by David after he committed adultery and murder)*

There are times when we become brokenhearted after we fall back into a bad habit. Other times, we become brokenhearted after doing the one sin we thought we would never do. The question is

what do you do in those moments? Do you just wallow in your guilt and shame and never allow your broken heart to be healed or is there another way?

David had fallen off the deep end, and it caused him to be brokenhearted. He had committed adultery and murder. In David's day, it was common for the Israelites to offer animal sacrifices to God after they had sinned. However, in this moment as he is praying after committing two significant sins, he says that he will not offer an animal sacrifice to God because God would not "*delight*" in it. He says that the sacrifice that God views as acceptable after his terrible sin is not an animal sacrifice but a "*broken and contrite heart.*" This is in line with what Jesus taught as well.

Jesus starts out His famous Sermon on the Mount by saying, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3).

The question is why are the animal sacrifices not a priority in either of these verses? It is because Jesus became the ultimate and final sacrifice for our sin, and now we can receive the benefits of that sacrifice when we come to Him with a spirit that is broken over our sin (Hebrews 10:1-18). The animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were a foreshadowing of what was to come. They were a taste of what was to come in the sacrifice of Christ. It was to show us that sin did need to be paid for and that Christ made the payment in full.

This means that the best action you can take after you sin is to bring your broken heart to God!

Being brokenhearted over sin is not a bad state to be in. God does not despise your brokenness. God takes your brokenness and forgives you so that your life can be made into something beautiful again.

One of the biggest errors you can make in life is not learning the value of a broken heart. Too many people never have a broken heart about their sin. The result of a lack of broken heartedness about sin leads to a broken soul that is never healed from sin. Allow yourself to be broken hearted so God can come and bring beauty out whatever mess you have made. Do not act like the mess is not there. Acknowledge it and allow God to do what only He can do.

So, what are you brokenhearted about? Or, to challenge you a bit, what sin should you be brokenhearted about that you are currently content with?

You can be rest assured that God does not meet your broken heart with judgement but with open arms of love. God did not reject David after committing murder and adultery when he came to Him with a broken heart. He will not reject you in judgment but will accept you with love if you come to Him openly and honestly. Today, you can come to Jesus by faith and repentance with your broken heart and be healed.

Daily Practice: Come to Christ in prayer about whatever sin you are broken about or should be broken about. When you come to Him in sincerity, He will hear and accept you.

"God does not despise your brokenness."

Day 19

What Makes Your Fear Flee

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” -1 John 4:18

Fear causes you to flee. It causes you to run from God, others, and the perfect plan that God has for you. Not only does fear cause you to flee, but it can also be a paralyzing force that stops you in your tracks. God does not want your heart to be filled with fear. Rather, God wants your heart to be filled with courage and strength.

So, the question is, how do you begin to flee from fear rather than letting fear cause you to flee? Love. We are told that *“perfect love casts out fear.”* Just like a demon can possess and control a person’s body so fear can possess and paralyze you. The good news is that like a demon, fear can be cast out of you. The powerful force of God’s unconditional love for you can cause any fear in your heart to flee.

Whenever you are being controlled by fear, you can be sure of one thing. You have stopped placing your faith in God’s great love for you. *“The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”* This means that your first step to take when you are filled with fear is not to be hard on yourself. Your first step is to refocus your faith on the love of God. Remember the great love of God that was willing to die a criminal’s death for you. Remember the great love that promises to never leave nor forsake you. Remember that the great love that does not change like shifting shadows but remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. Remember that His love was never based on your behavior, but His character because *“God is love”* (1 John 4:16b).

You might say, “But you do not know what type of trial I am facing that is causing me to be fearful” or “you do not know how bad and continuous my sin is.” True, I do not know the answer to those questions, but God does, and His love remains the same. You have no reason to fear any trial or test that comes your way because like David in Psalm 23:6 you can say, *“Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* You have no reason to fear punishment from God over your sins because His love has covered all your sins in the past, present, and future if you have placed your faith in Christ. God does discipline His children out of love, but He never punishes and banishes them to Hell out of anger. Therefore, you can take heart in God’s love for you as a safe hiding place when surrounded by your sins and trials in this life.

You might ask, “But doesn’t the Bible tell us we should fear God?” Yes, the Bible does tell us on numerous occasions that we are to fear God. However, that does not mean that we are to fear Him as a child fears their abusive parent. Rather, we are to fear God in the proper way which is to simply see Him as great as he really is. To fear God is to accurately see and savor His greatness and respond by giving Him our utmost respect and reverence. This is the healthy way to fear God. It is to respect and revere Him. The unhealthy way to fear God as His child is to constantly fear that He will punish you by sending you to hell. God is not a Father who desires

His children to live in fear of eternal punishment. He wants His children to feel the boldness and confidence that comes from the fountain of His free forgiveness.

Today, you can begin to see your fears flee rather than fleeing because of your fears. Ask God to increase your faith in His love for you, and your fear will flee! Your faith in His love might fail, but His love for you will never fail. May you experience the peace that comes from God's perfect love that can cast out any fear.

Daily Practice: Take a seat and close your eyes. Then, think of whatever you are most afraid of while clinching both hands in a fist. Once you have identified your greatest fear, open your palms up toward heaven as a way of telling God you are letting go of fear and now opening up to His love for you. Take a few moments to just receive and rest in His perfect love that casts out fear.

"God is not a Father who desires His children to live in fear!"

Day 20

Mustard Seed Faith

God will only use people in big ways if their faith in Him is really big. False! According to Jesus, this statement is far from the truth. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives us a lesson on the size of faith needed for God to act by using a mustard seed as an object lesson in Luke 13 and 17 chapters:

"Then Jesus asked, 'What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his own garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched nested in its branches.'" -Luke 13:18-19

"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' He replied, 'If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to the mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you.'" -Luke 17:5-6

Like Jesus mentions, mustard seeds are incredibly small. However, they can create something that is incredibly big. Mustard seeds start small but can become a towering tree. Here are two lessons that Jesus teaches us about faith by using mustard seeds as an example:



Firstly, our faith is often smaller than even a mustard seed. The apostles asked Jesus to “*increase*” their faith. I don’t know if you caught it, but Jesus’s reply is a little insulting to their level of faith. He says, “*If you had faith as small as a mustard seed.* Implication? Their faith was so small it couldn’t even compare to the smallness of a mustard seed.

It could be easy to snobbishly look down on the apostle’s faith. Why should they be lacking in faith when God in the flesh is right in front of them? However, we must take a long look in the mirror first. The truth is that we often have faith that is even smaller than a mustard seed too. We often place our faith in ourselves or what this world has to offer rather than placing our faith in God Himself. This is a huge mistake because God is the only person who is completely worthy of all our trust. Increase your faith in God today. Not because of who you are, but because, “*God is faithful*” (1Corinthians 1:9).

Secondly, power is not found in the size of your faith but in the size of God. Jesus tells us that if we just have faith as big as a mustard seed (which again is not very big) that we can say to a tree, “*Be uprooted and be planted in the sea, and it will obey you.*” What Jesus says here is astounding. He is making a connection between the faith you have to actual events that happen here on earth. It is a haunting thought for me to consider how many things have not happened in my life because I lacked the faith that was needed. Our faith in God to do the impossible here on Earth can powerfully change lives. The power is available to you and I, but the question is: Do we have the faith present in our hearts?

The good news is that a little faith can make a big difference. Ephesians 2:8 says, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*”

Maybe you have doubted the validity of your own faith. Maybe you have thought it is too small and that God might reject you. Remember, you are not accepted because of the size of your faith, but because of the size of God’s love. May you find comfort in the gift of God’s grace today as you place your faith in what Jesus has done for you. When you place your faith in Jesus, your faith might start small, but a small faith in a big God can do great things!

Daily Practice: Take time to read and reflect on Hebrews 11. It is one of the most incredible chapters in the Bible on faith.

“You are not accepted because of the size your faith, but because of the size of God’s love.”

Day 21

Thankfulness Leads to Peacefulness

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God’s peace which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”
-Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)

When Jamie and I got married, her family’s traditions also became my traditions. Her family became my family just as my family became her family.

Every year when I go to my in-laws for Thanksgiving, we do something that Jamie has done with her family ever since she was a little girl. We take the time as a family to write out a list of what we are most thankful for within the last year. We then read our lists to one another. Once we are finished reading our lists for the current year, we put them into a box that has all the lists from the previous years. Afterwards, each person takes a few lists from the previous years and reads those lists out loud as well. It is always funny to read how people are thankful for different people, places, and things at different ages. We always get a good laugh especially when we read what some of the family members wrote when they were twelve years old or younger.

Reading those lists can also be a very emotional time. When we reflect on what we were and are currently thankful for, we are reminded of both the good gifts God has given us, but even more so, we are reminded of the goodness of God. The goodness in our lives that we receive from God can be overwhelming. There are often tears, but they are not tears of grief; rather they are tears of joy. The kind of joy that can only be produced by thankfulness.

Philippians 4:6-7 tells us how thankfulness is one of the keys that opens the door to joy and peace in our lives when it says, *“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God’s peace which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”*

Notice, this is a promise. It is one of the most precious promises in all of Scripture. It is the promise for peace that passes all understanding. The peace all our hearts long for. If you have

ever struggled with feeling panicked, anxious, worried, or whatever word you want to use to describe the inner turmoil of the soul, this is a promise you need to claim. The promise is as follows:

***IF** you thank God for what He has done **THEN** you will experience God's peace.*

Therefore, if you are tired of feeling panicked and want to experience peacefulness, you must learn to practice giving thankfulness to God.

Now, the common understanding of thankfulness is quite superficial. Thankfulness is often a word used to describe a vague optimism about temporal things in this world. To be clear, thankfulness is not a "glass half full" mentality. It is much deeper than that. To put it plainly, a Biblical definition of thankfulness could be summed up as:

Thankfulness is thoughtfulness about the goodness of God.

Paul tells us to, "thank God for all He has done." The subject of our thankfulness is primarily about what God has done for us. This means that there is always a reason to be thankful because no matter what happens in your life, what Christ has done for you on the cross never changes.

You might have lost all your money, but you can still be thankful for the immeasurable riches of God's grace.

Your parents might have disowned you, but you have a heavenly Father who will never leave you nor forsake you if you have placed your faith in Him.

You might have a spouse who has walked out on you, but you are the bride of Christ and Christ is the perfect husband who will always be faithful to you.

You might have a bad health report, but you can still be thankful that if you have placed your faith in Jesus, you have a future ahead of you in heaven where health will never be an issue.

You might feel unloved by a person in your life, but you can still be thankful that God's love will never leave you.

No matter what you are going through, you can be thankful. You can be thankful because God's goodness never changes. Today, you can turn your thoughts toward the goodness of God. When you do that, you will possess the kind of thankfulness that always leads to peacefulness.

Daily Practice: Take time to pray by thanking God for all that He has done for you. If you need to make a list, go for it. If you want to just say what comes to your mind as you talk to Him, that works too.

"Thankfulness is thoughtfulness about the goodness of God."

Day 22

Why Love is the Greatest

“And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”
-1 Corinthians 13:13

Faith, hope, and love are the three pillars upon which every believer must build their life. Among the three pillars we are to build our life on, love is the greatest of those pillars. The great love of God is the chief pillar that when pulled out, the whole building collapses. Faith and hope are essential. You cannot be a Christian without faith and hope. However, faith and hope are impossible without love. Let me explain.

Faith is a focal point of what it means to follow Jesus. We are told that, *“everything that does not come from faith is sin”* (Romans 14:23b). We are also told to, *“live by faith, not by sight”* (2 Corinthians 5:7). Most importantly faith in Jesus is how we receive the grace of Jesus, *“for it is by grace you have been saved through faith”* (Ephesians 2:8).

To place your faith in a person is to confidently trust them to be who they claim to be. Now, Christian faith is to trust that Christ is who He says He is. 1 John 4:8b tells us that, *“God is love.”* Meaning to place your faith in Jesus is to place your faith in the great love of God. The cross is where Christ’s love for us is most clearly communicated. It is on the cross we see His sacrificial love for us. It is on the cross we see that Christ cares for us more than anyone else does. If there is no love of God displayed on the cross, then there is nothing to place our faith in. Without love, we are without reason to live by faith in Christ. Because of God’s great love for us, we have every reason in the world to trust Him with all our heart. Love is what inspires our faith. *If you want to grow in your faith, stop looking within and start looking at God’s love.* Many people think they can grow in faith through trying harder, but it is quite the contrary. Faith begins because of love, and it grows because of love. Faith is great, but love is greater!

Hope is necessary to have a healthy soul. We are told that hope is, *“an anchor for the soul, firm and secure”* (Hebrews 6:19a). We are told that, *“hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?”* (Romans 8:24). Hope is a confident expectation for a better future. Hope for a better future is the anchor that keeps the ship of your soul grounded when you go through storms. You never hope for what you have, but for what you believe you will have one day. Through Christ, you can have the hope of heaven, which is the best future anyone could ever hope for. Through Christ, you have the hope that even when bad events do unfold in your life that God *works all things together for good.* (Romans 8:28). Hope is essential. Without hope, your heart will never have the strength it needs to endure trials. However, hope is impossible without God’s love. Without God’s love there is nothing and no one to truly hope in. Without God’s love, we would never be offered the hope of heaven, but would be stuck with the punishment of hell. If God did not love us we would not have a bright future to hope in but a dark future to dread. Hope is great, but love is greater!

Today, you can build your life on the solid foundation of God's love for you. His love for you is the greatest gift you can ever receive. You can receive His love by faith. You can have hope in a better future because of His love. Faith and hope are great, but do not ever forget that God's love for you is the greatest gift you will ever receive!

Daily Practice: Take some time to read and reflect on all of 1 Corinthians 13. Many call this *the* chapter in the Bible on love. It is powerful.

"The great love of God is the chief pillar that when pulled out, the whole building collapses."

Day 23

Trust and Treasure

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." -Matthew 6:21

In the movie *National Treasure*, Nicholas Cage plays a man named Benjamin Gates. Benjamin Gates is from a family with a long history of hunting treasure. Before he was born his ancestors found a lot of clues but never found the treasure itself. In fact, his father was so sick of only finding clues that he gave up on the treasure hunt. However, Benjamin does not give up on the treasure hunt. He continues his family's long legacy of hunting for hidden treasure.

Whether you know or not, Benjamin's story describes you. It describes me. We are all searching for treasures here on this earth that we think will make us happy.

Now, everyone's treasure might look a little different. You may treasure money, success, education, sex, a child, a spouse, or something else. Instead of continuing to guess whatever it is you treasure most, I will just ask you right now:

What is it that you treasure most? What is most valuable to you? What is it in this world that you think can bring you ultimate happiness in life? According to Jesus, *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Meaning, whatever you treasure the most reveals what you trust to make you happy. If you want to know how much you trust Jesus with your life, look at how much you treasure Him. *Your level of treasuring reveals your level of trusting.*

The truth is that Jesus is the most valuable person in the world. Therefore, we should treasure Him above anyone or anything else.

In Ephesians 3:8 the Apostle Paul says, *“Though I am least deserving of all God’s people, He graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ”* (NLT).

Through faith in Christ, you are given free access to relationship with God. Free access to forgiveness. Free access to a friend who will never fail you. Free access to a God who knows everything about you but still loves you unconditionally. *“Endless treasures!”*

When you know more about who Jesus is you will naturally begin to treasure Him more. When you treasure Christ, you will trust Him more. What do you treasure and trust most right now? May it be Christ and Christ alone.

Daily Practice: Read all of Matthew 6 for further reflection and study.

“Whatever you treasure the most reveals what you trust to make you happy.”

Day 24

Lessons from the First Fight

My brother and I shared a room growing up. He was and still is my best friend. However, during our years of sharing a room, we got into our fair share of fights. Words would be exchanged. An occasional fist would be thrown too. Of course, I would always win the fights as the older brother.

It does not take long when reading the Bible to see the first fight in human history. It is between two brothers named Cain and Abel. The fight ended with the ground being soaked with the blood of Abel after he was brutally and unjustly attacked and killed by his older brother. There are three crucial lessons about anger that can be learned from the first fight that you must learn if you want to have more relational harmony and less relational conflict in your life:

Lesson #1- Resentment leads to anger

“Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So, Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” -Genesis 4:2b-5

Abel gives his best to God, so his offering is received by God with favor. On the other hand, Cain seems to bring ordinary fruits from his crop to God as an offering. He does not bring anything special before the Lord. He does not give God his best. Unlike Abel, he is religiously

giving a small amount rather than out of a deep relationship, sacrificially giving above and beyond.

Cain sees how Abel's gift is received more favorably, and he instantly becomes angry. Why? Resentment. He saw that his brother was doing better than him, and he began to be bitter against his brother. He was jealous and began to wish that his little brother was not so perfect. He was bitter against the golden boy. His resentment led to anger, and it is the same with you and me. When we get angry with a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a co-worker, or anyone else, it often comes from a place of resentment. Therefore, if you want to avoid getting unnecessarily angry, guard your heart against resentment. Learn to celebrate other people's victories rather than resenting them for accomplishing something you wish you had done.

Lesson #2- Anger is a choice

"Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." -Genesis 4:6-7

The Lord warns Cain about his anger before he acts on it. He personifies Cain's anger by saying that *"sin is crouching at your door."* God knew what Cain's anger could and would lead to and he was trying to help him. God's final words to Cain are, *"you must rule over it."* In other words, Cain had a choice. He could rule over his anger or let his anger rule over him. It is the same with you and me.

We all have had moments when we felt the strong urge to lash out in anger. There is nothing wrong about feeling angry in a moment. In fact, there is a time to be righteously angry and express your angry feelings in a healthy way. However, most of the time we are angry about matters that we should not be angry about. One of the keys to not acting on your unrighteous anger as regularly is realizing that you have a choice. So many people think they do not have a choice. It is easy for us to be so fixated on our feelings that we forget we have a choice. Yes, your feelings may be strong, but you still have a choice. I have found the best way to not act out my anger is to *express* my emotions to God through prayer rather than *repress* them through denial. The longer you stuff your emotions down, the more likely you will be to explode. Instead, take your anger to God. Vent to Him. He can handle it.

Lesson #3- Anger causes destruction

"Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field' While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him." -Genesis 4:8

Cain does not control his anger. His anger controls him, so he attacks and kills his own baby brother. What a tragedy. Anger is like dynamite. It is very destructive. Now, maybe your anger has not caused you to kill a person. However, I am sure that your anger has killed some relationships and opportunities in your life. I know it has for me. Keeping the destructive quality of anger in mind will help you from getting angry if you truly care about the victim of your anger.

We all consistently fall short of being patient and kind with people, but God does not. Psalm 103:8 declares, *“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.”* The good news is that God is not quick to get angry about your anger towards others. He is exceedingly kind and patient with you. Allow His patience and kindness to cleanse you of all your sin and inspire you to be less like Cain and more like Christ.

Daily Practice: Who is someone you have been fighting with lately? Take a moment to pray for them. Ask God to empower you to forgive them and to show you if there is anything you need to ask them for forgiveness for too.

“God is not quick to get angry about your anger towards others.”

Day 25

What to Hide in Your Heart

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you...I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.” -Psalm 119:11 & 15

Everybody is hiding something in their heart. The question is, “What should you hide in your heart?” Many people hide dreams of success, fame, a new house, a new car, marrying the perfect spouse, or having children in their heart. None of these dreams are wrong within themselves, but they should not be what you are hiding in your heart the most.

The Psalmist had hidden God’s word in his heart so that he would, not sin against God. The way he hid God’s word in his heart was by practicing meditation. Here we see that the Psalmist understood three truths about hiding God’s word in your heart that can drastically transform your life.

Firstly, he understood that whatever is hidden in your heart will determine how you live.

Whatever is hidden in your heart is what you will find your hands naturally doing. Your heart is the seat of your deepest desires. What you do always flows from your deepest desires. He knew that conquering the sins that he was prone to falling into meant he had to hide God’s word in his heart. This is the starting point for when you battle sin. You must realize that the battle against sin is not primarily a battle against the world but is primarily a battle within your own heart. It is a battle of your desires. Therefore, “trying harder” will not work. You need a transformed heart.

Secondly, he understood that all sin is primarily against God. Every time we go against what God has told us to do or not do in His word, it is rebellion against Him. Now, our rebellion against God will naturally hurt ourselves and our relationships with others, but it is primarily an offense against God. All sin stems from a lack of trust in the goodness of God’s word.

Thirdly, the Psalmist realized that hiding is the same as meditating. To meditate on a truth is to think about it deeply. Whatever you think about the most tends to be what grips your heart. Now, it is easier to meditate on God's word once you have memorized it. I want to encourage you to choose any verse in the Bible that comforts or challenges you and memorize it. Then, commit to meditate upon that verse for anywhere between one week to a month. This practice will change the way you think, which will change your heart, which in turn will change your life.

As a kid growing up, I went to a private Christian school where they graded us weekly on Bible memorization. Looking back, I appreciate that I was encouraged to memorize God's word. However, I also see the damage that those assignments did on my soul. They taught me to temporarily memorize God's word so I could regurgitate it for a grade without ever meditating on it so that it became meaningful to me personally. If you only memorize God's word without meditating on it, it will not do you any good. *Memorization combined with meditation brings transformation.*

As you begin to hide God's word in your heart there will still be times that you stumble. There will be times when you do not live according to God's word. The good news is that *"The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). As the embodiment of God's word, Jesus came to earth not to judge you for your sins but to give you both grace and truth. He loves you enough to tell you the truth about where you have fallen short, but He also loves you enough to die for your sins so that you can be forgiven and brought into a renewed relationship with Him. May you remember what the Word did for you as you hide God's word in your heart.

Daily Practice: Begin reading Romans 8. Once a verse stands out to you, stop reading and meditate on it throughout your day.

"Memorization combined with meditation brings transformation!"

Day 26

Closet Christianity

"You are the light of the world, like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." -Matthew 5:14-16 (NLT)

If you have received Jesus's love by faith, *"you are the light of the world."* Jesus does not simply say you could be the light of the world. No, He declares that you already are the light of the world!

The moment you know what it means to be both fully known and fully loved by God, you have a light inside you that can defeat any darkness in this world. For the Christian, the question is not “Is there light inside you?” The question is “Are you letting your light shine?”

Unfortunately, so many Christians never let their light shine as bright as it could. Many followers of Jesus live what I like to call closet Christianity. What is closet Christianity? It is when you have a *personal relationship* with Jesus, but you do not have a *public relationship* with Him. Think about it like this. If I only had a private but not a public relationship with my wife, that would be an insult to her. If I was too embarrassed to be around her or talk about her in public, that would reflect a serious issue in my relationship with her. It is the same with your relationship with Jesus.

We live in a time when people are boldly coming out of the closet to declare that they have deviated from Biblical truths on sexuality. However, many Christians are not bold enough to come out of the closet to share their faith. What a shame! The world seems to be bolder about sharing their sin with the world than we as Christians are about sharing Christ with the world. May it not be so any longer!

Instead, of hiding your light “*under a basket,*” you can set it on its stand. When you do that, you will become a “*city on a hill that cannot be hidden.*” You might ask, “Why should I want to be a “city on a hill that cannot be hidden?” There are two primary reasons.

Firstly, love should motivate you to shine your light. Jesus loves those who are lost. If we do not learn to love the lost like Jesus does by letting our lights shine, then we have missed the mark. Secondly, the main objective is to bring glory to God. When you let your light shine, it is not a spotlight to draw attention to you. It is a spotlight that draws attention to God. That is why Jesus said, “*let your light shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*” It is all out of a love for people and a hunger to bring glory of Jesus.

Today, you can receive Jesus’ love and let your light shine instead of being a closet Christian.

Daily Practice: Invite one person who does not have a relationship with Jesus to come to church with you this Sunday. If you do this, it might just change someone’s life forever.

Day 27

Three Kinds of Relationships You Need

There are three different kinds of relationships that you need to have in your life. If you do not have all three of these relationships in your life, you will never grow into the person of love God desires you to be. Each relationship offers you different opportunities to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). Here are the three types of relationship you need to have in your life if you want to become a person of love:

1. Spiritual Parents

The Apostle Paul was a spiritual parent to a young man named Timothy. Paul allowed Timothy to travel with him on his missionary journeys and poured his life into him. Paul starts out one his personal and pastoral letters to Timothy by saying, “*To Timothy my true son in the faith*” (1 Timothy 1:2a). Paul was a spiritual parent to Timothy.

Spiritual parents are people who have walked ahead of you. Spiritual parents are people you follow. You follow their example and learn from their experiences. Spiritual parents are an invaluable resource that will help you have wisdom beyond your years. A spiritual parent has a deeper grasp of God’s great love than you do. They gladly impart their spiritual knowledge into your life. When you are being spiritually parented you are primarily receiving and are partially giving to the other person.

2. Spiritual Siblings

In Acts 15:7b Peter addresses his fellow apostles and elders in the church by calling them, “*brothers.*” If you read the whole New Testament, you will notice that addressing someone as a brother or sister was common practice in the church.

Spiritual siblings are people who walk alongside you. They are your friends and partners in ministry. They are typically at a similar life stage as you, which allows you to relate more easily with one another. Spiritual siblings understand where you are because they are where you are. Spiritual siblings get to give to one another, which can create a great deal of closeness and encouragement.

3. Spiritual Children

Timothy was a spiritual child to Paul since Paul was a spiritual father to him.

Spiritual children are people who follow you. You are not mature in your faith until you have come to the point where you can spiritually parent other people. You do not have to know everything to lead someone; you just have to be one step in front of them so that they can follow you. In fact, the moment you receive God’s love by placing your faith in Jesus, you already know more than anyone who does not personally know God’s love yet. You have more to offer to

others than you probably think. When you have spiritual children, you are primarily giving and partially receiving.

I do not know if you noticed it or not, but all the terms above are familial in nature. Do you know why? Because the church is to be primarily seen as your spiritual family. You were created for community by Christ. You are not just meant to have a love relationship with Jesus but with the spiritual family that is the church. Too many people think they can live the Christian life on a spiritual island with just Jesus and themselves. That could not be further from the truth! God designed you for relationship with Himself and others.

Maybe you have been hurt by the church in the past, so you are more likely to trust Christ than you are to trust the church. If that is the case, I totally understand, and I am sorry. I have been deeply hurt by fellow church members and leaders too. However, I do not use my hurts as an excuse to disconnect myself from the community Christ designed me to be a part of. Do not let the hurt from your past keep you from experiencing the relationships God wants you to experience through the church in the present. Besides, Christ is the only one who is perfect anyways. There is no such thing as a perfect church. There are healthy churches, but there is not a single perfect church in existence.

Today, you can receive Jesus' love knowing that He also created you to have loving relationships with other people too. Christ died not just so that you could be united to Him but be united to the church. If you feel alone, there is no reason why you must stay alone. There will be times when life beats you down, and you will not be able to lift yourself up with God's love. You will need a spiritual parent, sibling, or child to speak and show the love of God so you can be lifted up in times when you need help. We are better together, so do not live life alone. Get connected and stay connected to a Christ-centered church.

Daily Practice: Take some time today to be intentional about connecting into Christ-centered community. Connect with a spiritual parent, sibling, or child. If you do not currently belong to a church, find one and get connected into community ASAP!

"You were created for community by Christ."

Day 28

Doing Things for God but Having a Heart That is Far from Him

"In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, 'Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry' (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his

intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood).” -Acts 1:15-19

Judas’s story is a sober reminder that we can do things for God but still have a heart that is far from Him. We know from the Gospels that Judas likely healed people and casted out demons just like the other apostles since Peter said he “*shared in our ministry.*” Here is the point: Judas was doing things for God on a surface level but had not truly received the love of God in his heart.

You see, this is where the stern warning comes from the story. We can show up to church, pray, study the Bible, listen to sermons, and even lead someone to Christ and still have a heart that is far from God. That is why it is so important to personally know the love of Jesus so you can truly show the love of Jesus to others. The first priority in life should always be personally knowing the love of Jesus. Once you genuinely know Jesus’ love, you will begin to naturally show that same love to others.

Now, we know that Judas’ ministry was invalid and came from a heart that truly did not know the love of Jesus for two reasons. Firstly, not only did he betray Christ for thirty pieces of silver, but as the treasurer for Jesus he stole money for himself throughout Jesus’ three-year ministry. Secondly, he did not repent or seek out forgiveness for what he did. Instead, he killed himself because of the shame that came from his sin.

Judas knew what he did was wrong. He felt bad about what he had done. However, he never repented, received healing, or sought out forgiveness. Rather than finding relief from his shame through the forgiveness of God, he tried to relieve himself by killing himself.

Suicide is the most extreme way one may try to end the inner turmoil within their soul. However, there are other less extreme ways that we try to numb the shame that comes from our sin. We distract ourselves with media, we work too much, we consume alcohol, we smoke, we eat too much, and I could go on and on. The point is that there is only one place where we can find true relief from our shame. That place is the loving arms of Jesus. If you are thinking of trying to escape the pain of this life by killing yourself, do not do it. God’s love can meet you where you are right now and give you a better hope and a future. There is a plan and a purpose for your life, no matter what you have done or are currently going through.

Romans 8:1 says, “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” If you place your faith in Jesus, you have no reason to be ashamed of anything. All your sin is completely covered by the perfect life of Christ. When God looks at you, He does not see your sin, but He sees you as if you have lived the perfect life of Christ.

I wish Judas would have known that the truth of “*no condemnation*” was available to him even after he had betrayed Christ to his brutal death on the cross. You see, Judas was not the only person who failed Jesus during His final hours. Peter failed Jesus too. He denied Christ three times. Peter did feel bad about what he did, but he did not kill himself. He stayed alive long enough to see the resurrected Christ and received restoration. He was loved, forgiven, and empowered to be the leader he was born to be. The same man who denied Christ three times became the leader of leaders in the early church.

So, will you be like Peter or Judas? They both messed up in major ways. The only difference was that one saw their sin and shame covered by the love of Christ while the other lost their life. Today, you can experience the freedom that comes from the gift of God's love in your life so that you may become the kind of leader God created you to be!

Daily Practice: Take time to read and reflect on John 21. It tells the story of Jesus forgiving and restoring Peter to ministry after he denied Christ.

"Once you genuinely know Jesus' love, you will begin to naturally show that same love to others."

Day 29

Truths That Never Change

"I the Lord do not change." -Malachi 3:6a

The world is constantly changing. The good news is that the Lord never changes. He has no need to change because unlike you and I, He is completely perfect.

When we become emotionally tied to these changing times, our emotions can send us on quite the roller coaster ride. One moment we feel good and the other moment we feel completely down in the dumps. I do not want your life to be like an emotional rollercoaster during times of uncertainty. I want you to be able to have strength in the middle of any storm.

I have found that when the world around me is rapidly changing that it is always best to remind myself of the truths about God that never change. So, here are three truths that never change that can give you the courage that you need during chaotic times:

Firstly, God's love for you never changes.

Romans 8:38-39 says, *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither the angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

There is no suffering that you can go through that can snatch God's love away from your soul. God's love will never leave you nor forsake you. *The problem is that we often equate being loved with feeling loved.* Just because you do not feel God's love during times of uncertainty, does not mean God's love has left you. In my relationship with my beautiful wife, there are times when I feel close to her and there are times when I do not feel as close to her. Regardless of how I feel,

we are still married, and we will always be married until one of us dies. God is the perfect and faithful husband who has promised to love you every day. Do not let your feelings cause you to doubt God's unfailing love towards you. God's love for you never changes!

Secondly, God's Word never changes.

Isaiah 40:8 says, *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever"* (ESV).

The words that are spoken on the news cycle change daily. One day someone is a hero and the other day they are a zero. Keeping up with the current news cycle can be exhausting because people's opinions on topics are varied and constantly changing. The same is not true with God's word. The Bible never changes. The Bible is not a document that is open for editing. No erasers are needed for the Bible. However, highlighters are needed for the greatest book of all time. It has vastly outsold any other book in human history for good reason. The Bible is both divinely inspired and without any errors, so it is a solid bedrock of truth that never changes (2 Timothy 3:16). Take the time every day to read, memorize, and meditate upon the treasured truths found in the sacred Scriptures.

Thirdly, God's sovereignty never changes.

Psalms 90:2 says, *"Before the mountains were born, before You gave birth to the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God."*

When life does not go our way, we tend to question God's sovereignty. We tend to ask questions like:

- "Why would God allow this?"
- "Is God still in control?"
- "Is God truly good?"

These questions are both honest and understandable when thinking from a human perspective. I have found that God does not cast us away when we ask such questions. Rather, God provides Himself as both the answer for these questions and the source of comfort that is needed when asking them. God has always been God from *"everlasting to everlasting."* He is all-powerful and is always in control. Jesus said that not even birds fall to the ground *"apart from the will of your Father"* (Matthew 10:29). Just because life seems out of control does not mean that God is not in control. Romans 8:28 promises that God will work *"all things together for good."* We must trust that although not all things on this Earth are good, that God is working all things together for our good. He has a bigger plan that we cannot see, and we must learn to humbly trust Him step by step. He is sovereign, so trust Him!

If you are weary of the constant changes that have been taking place in your life lately, take courage in these truths that never change. God's love will never leave you; His word will never be empty; and He is sovereign still. These are the truths that have never and will never change!

Daily Practice: Take some time to mediate on and thank God for one of the listed truths about God that never changes. If there is a change going on in your life that you are anxious about, bring that to the Lord in prayer too.

“No erasers are needed for the Bible. However, highlighters are needed for the greatest book of all time.”

Day 30

Love, Obedience, and the Spirit

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, for He lives with you and will be in you.” -John 14:15-17

We naturally know that love is not just a matter of words. Loving someone does involve words. However, it involves so much more than just mere words. It involves action!

I have seen this play out in my marriage time and time again. I am a words person by nature (hence why I speak for a living) so telling my wife, “I love you” is something that I say to her without hesitation several times a day. I have noticed that she does appreciate my loving words to her, but me telling her “I love you” is typically not what makes her feel most loved. She typically feels most loved when I *do* something loving for her. Maybe it is taking out the trash, doing the dishes, taking our baby on a walk so she can have time to rest, or really anything that has to do with service.

Love is deeply connected to action. We cannot just love with words, but with tangible acts of service too. That is why Jesus says, *“If you love me, keep my commands.”* Jesus is reminding us that to love God does not merely mean to intellectually believe He exists or that we once prayed a prayer to ask Him into our heart. Rather, He is talking about us having a deep and authentic relationship with Him that results in us trusting His character by obeying His commandments.

Now, it must be made clear that we must not obey God out of *duty*, but out of *delight*. The Psalmist proclaimed, *“I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word”* (Psalm 119:16).

You see, when you know how much God loves you and always wants the best for you, you will *want to* obey Him rather than feeling like you *have to* obey Him. You will no longer see obedience as a religious duty, but as an overflow of a relationship filled with delight.

Now, obeying God even when we know how much He loves us and wants the best for us is still hard. We live in a world that is constantly contradicting God's word and trying to pull us in the wrong direction. In addition, we have our own fallen feelings that constantly contradict God's word as well.

The good news is that God never asks us to pursue His will on our own power. Rather, He supplies us with His power and presence through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus could say, *"He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever; the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, for He lives with you and will be in you."*

When you place your faith in Jesus you are not just *forgiven* but are *filled* with the Holy Spirit. This means that the very presence of God dwells within you. The same power and presence that rose Christ from the dead lives in you! The Holy Spirit dwells within you to remind you of the truth about His word, the world, and yourself. He can empower you to conquer the temptations you feel trapped in. It is through His power that you can begin to joyfully obey God more than ever before.

At the end of the day, none of us have obeyed God perfectly; nor will we ever be fully perfect while here on Earth. However, we have hope in the only perfect person who ever lived. Jesus lived the perfect life and died in our place so that we could be forgiven of our sins and filled with the Holy Spirit so we can follow Him in obedience.

Daily Practice: Take time to pray by asking God how you have been disobedient lately. Then, thank God for His forgiveness, and ask Him to help you overcome that sin through the power of His Holy Spirit.

"When you place your faith in Jesus you are not just forgiven but are filled with the Holy Spirit."

Day 31

When Your Faith is Faltering

"Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"
-Mark 9:24

There once was a father who had a son. The son was possessed by a demon. The demon would often cause his son to be mute and throw him into violent convulsions. The father had heard of Jesus and began to have a glimmer of hope that his son could be normal once again. The disciples of Jesus were accessible so he asked them to pray for his son so he could be healed. The disciples prayed for his son, yet the demon remained while the father's hope began to unravel.

Finally, the father had access to Jesus and explained the situation to Him. He asked Jesus “if” He could heal his son. Jesus did not like that word “if.” Jesus responded to the father’s request by essentially saying, “*What do you mean, ‘If I can?’ Anything is possible if a person believes.*”

The Father’s response to Jesus is relatable. He says, “*I do believe; but help me overcome my unbelief.*” Jesus sees the father’s faltering yet genuine faith and miraculously heals his son instantly.

What I find so touching about this story is the genuineness of this father’s faith that was faltering. He freely confesses to have belief and unbelief at the same moment. However, He does not just confess the faltering nature of his faith. He proceeds to ask Jesus to help him overcome his unbelief. Jesus had no problem healing the man’s son. The son who had been enslaved by a demon was now free.

In the moments in your life when your faith is faltering, you would do well to follow this father’s example. Do not try to hide your doubts from God or others. Do not try to appear to be the perfect Christian who never has any questions or struggles. Rather, confess your doubts to God and others.

You see, admitting your doubts is a doorway to a deeper faith! Doubt is most dangerous when it is never confessed but is repressed. Repressed doubt always causes faith to decline. Freely confess your doubts to the God of grace who loves you not because of the size of your faith but because of who He is.

Once you confess your doubts to God, ask Him to increase your faith. Do you think asking God to increase your faith in Him is a prayer request He would like to answer with a yes? I think so! Asking God to increase your faith in Him is one the greatest prayers you could ever pray. God is a loving Father, so you can ask Him to increase your faith knowing that He will hear you.

Whatever you are having a hard time trusting God with today, be honest about it with Him and ask Him to increase your faith. God will always be faithful to you, so you can confidently put your faith in Him.

Daily Practice: Take time to pray to God by confessing where your faith has been lacking and ask Him to increase your faith in Him.

“Admitting your doubts is a doorway to a deeper faith.”

Day 32

The Bible Is Not Just a Book

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints, and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” -Hebrews 4:12

I finished my M.A. program at Wheaton College Graduate School last year. I was talking about finishing my degree with one of my sisters the other night, and I started laughing. I started laughing because growing up I was a terrible student. I was such a bad student that I barely graduated high school. In fact, one of the reasons why I believe in God is because it is a miracle that I graduated high school! (I know, a lame joke.) Seriously though, sometimes I wonder if the school administration just passed me along because they did not want to deal with me for another year.

My school experience drastically changed once I went to Bible college. I immediately became an A and B student. I know the reason why the change occurred. I was no longer studying *a book*, but I was studying *the book*. I was taking time to study the most important subject in the world, God.

The moment I began to study the Bible seriously it was unlike reading any other book I had ever read before. It was as if the very words were jumping off the pages and into my heart. Once God’s word was in my heart, my whole life began to drastically change in more ways than one.

What makes the Bible different from all other books is that it is, *“alive and active.”* You can read the words and they can jump off the page and into your heart. You can read a letter that God inspired the Apostle Paul to write to a church a few thousand years ago and it can speak directly to you today. Perhaps it can speak to your conflict at home or at work, your worries, the big decision you must make soon, the sin you have been struggling with for years, your identity crisis, and so much more. The Bible is not a book where the words should stay on the pages. The words are meant to jump off the page and *“penetrate”* your heart. The Bible is *“alive and active”* and is ready to be made active in every part of your life if you read it every day.

Since the Bible is *“alive and active,”* it will often *“judge”* your *“thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* The Bible is a very comforting book in so many ways. It draws us closer to Christ by revealing His love for us. Because God loves us, He does not only comfort us with His words, but convicts us with His words as well. I cannot tell you how many times I have experienced this in my own walk with Christ. There have been many sinful patterns in my life that I did not think were that bad. However, as I read the Bible it was like a sword slicing through an arm, and my spirit was sliced with the type of conviction only God’s word can bring. In reading the Bible, I am shown the seriousness of my sin and run to my Savior’s loving arms with a changed mind about what I have been doing. This is what we are meant to experience when we read the Bible.

Many people want to change what the Bible says when it conflicts with their worldview. However, you are not meant to change the Bible because the Bible is meant to change you! You will find that when you read God’s word daily, you will become a changed person over time. You will become more of who you were made to be because you will become closer to who you were made to be with.

Today, you can begin or continue to make reading God's word a daily habit. I wrote this devotional not to keep you reliant on my writings, but to get you connected to God's word. Do not neglect God's love letter to you that is the Bible. If your father wrote an elaborate love letter to you, you would not leave it unopened. Your Heavenly Father has written you the most elaborate love letter ever written in the history of world. Do not leave it unopened. Discover its contents and be changed by His great love for you!

Daily Practice: Take time to read and reflect on God's word today. John 1 is a good place to start. If you ever want to read an entire book of the Bible, I encourage you to start by reading the entire book of John by reading a chapter a day. If you do it, God will speak to you and change your life!

"The Bible is not a book where the words should stay on the pages. The words are meant to jump off the page and penetrate your heart!"

Day 33

Escaping the People Pleaser Trap

"As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." -Galatians 1:9-10

The Apostle Paul did not live to please people. He lived to please God. Out of all the letters he wrote to churches, his letter to the church in Galatia is without a doubt the most confrontational. The reason why Paul felt the need to turn up his intensity on them is because they had begun to abandon the gospel of grace.

Instead of holding to the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, they began to distort the gospel. They substituted grace for good works and started to believe people could earn their way into favor with God. This is the opposite of God's grace. God's grace is the fact that He loves you even when you do not deserve it. God's grace is the fact that all you must do is receive His love by faith as a gift. Legalism is when you must earn love from God. Legalism is trying to work your way to God rather recognizing that He has already worked His way to you by grace.

The gospel of grace is the central theme of the Bible. To mess with the gospel is to mess with the main thing. Paul had no patience for the Galatian's gospel error, so he confronts them head-on by telling them that anyone who preaches a false gospel is *"under God's curse."* Now, that is harsh language. It is also appropriate language when considering the high stakes of the situation. You

might think, “Paul, you should be more diplomatic here. What you said does not sound very loving to me at all!” This is where our false definition of love is revealed. Love is not always expressed in a way that resembles a soft and cuddly teddy bear. Sometimes, love means boldly speaking the truth even when it might hurt someone’s feelings. Why? Because a person who truly loves others is willing to temporarily wound someone with the truth so that they can have a better future.

The problem is we often do not speak hard truths to people out of love because we have a big problem. That problem is falling into the people pleasing trap. Rather than living a life that is only concerned about doing what pleases God, we are constantly concerned about what other people think about us. The sad part is this: *When you fall into the people pleaser trap you become paralyzed and thus unable to live out God’s purpose for your life.*

You have probably noticed this already, but much of what the world believes and does is at odds with the truth of God’s word. Therefore, you will always be constantly pressured to cave into the people pleasing trap. You will constantly be pressured to go along with the strong current of the crowd. The question is not, “Will you experience pressure to please people rather than God?” The question is, “Will you go against the grain?” Think about it like this: If you rub your hand on a piece of wood and go along with the grain, it will be relatively smooth. If you rub your hand on a piece of wood and go against the grain, there is a good chance you will get a splinter. To follow Jesus is to be willing to go against the grain of this world with the truth of God’s word even when it means you might get splinters.

Now, I am not going to pretend like it is easy to go against the grain. The pressure to fall into the people pleasing trap is enormously and tempting. However, there are two steps you can take to escape the people pleasing trap. Firstly, you must be liberated from needing to be accepted by others by resting in the knowledge of already being accepted by Jesus. You see, Paul knew that He was fully known and accepted in Christ through the gospel of grace. He knew he was forgiven and accepted by God, so he did not need to be accepted by people. The more you experience the acceptance that comes from the gospel of grace, the less you will feed your addiction to the acceptance of people.

Secondly, you must realize there is one opinion that matters the most. Paul was not obsessed with his image. He was obsessed with pleasing the Lord because he knew what opinion carried the most weight. The only way you will ever be set free from the prison of people pleasing is by prioritizing God’s opinion over everyone else’s.

Today, you can escape the people pleaser trap and begin to boldly speak the truth. To be sure, this does not mean you should become a bully with God’s truth. Jesus came to earth in both “*grace and truth*” (John 1:14b). Far too many people claim to share God’s truth when they are really being bullies and false followers of Christ. God wants you to “*speak the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15a). This can only happen when you realize how much God loves and accepts you. It is through His love that you can be liberated to go against the grain and get splinters for the glory of God.

Daily Practice: What area of your life have you been living to please people instead of God? Confess that area of your life to God in prayer and ask for strength to live to please Him instead.

“The more you experience the acceptance that comes from the gospel of grace, the less you will feed your addiction for acceptance from people.”

Day 34

What Love Requires

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” -John 15:13

Molokai is a Hawaiian island that was once the house for lepers. Whenever someone contracted leprosy, they were sent there to be quarantined from the rest of society. They were seen as a danger to society and became outcasts without any substantial support.

A Catholic priest named Father Damien felt compelled by God to serve the lepers. He went to the one place no one else wanted to go because they were afraid to catch the disease and die. He faithfully and sacrificially served the community of lepers on Molokai for years until he eventually caught the disease and died at the young age of forty-nine.

We learn what love requires from the sacrificial service of Father Damien.

Love requires risk.

Love requires that you risk your life for the sake of another. It requires being willing to risk death so that someone else can have a better life.

C.S. Lewis famously said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.”³

Too often we do not want to take risks that can lead to loss. We end up settling for a safe life that is free from anything that looks like sacrifice. We are more focused on preserving self, rather than being willing to sacrifice for others.

³ Lewis, C. S. (2017). *The Four Loves*. HarperCollins.

Jesus powerfully proclaimed that, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

Jesus told His disciples what love requires knowing that He would fulfill its requirements unlike anyone else ever would. He laid down His life on the cross for us so that by faith we could become a part of the family of God forever.

So, what risk do you need to take today so that you can love someone? Receive the great love of God and then take a risky step of love today.

Daily Practice: Take time to pray by asking God what sacrifice He wants you to make for someone in your life today. Once you sense what the Holy Spirit is leading you to do, go and lovingly make that sacrifice for that person.

“What risk do you need to take today so that you can love someone?”

Day 35

Vending Machines and God

“When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud, then they forgot me.” -Hosea 13:6

All of us have used vending machines before. We are hungry for a snack, so we walk up to the vending machine to see what looks good to us in the moment. Once we see what we want, we put in our coins, type in the right numbers and letters, watch the snack of our choice graciously fall to where it is supposed to, and then we grab it and walk away.

Unfortunately, how we interact with vending machines is how we can sometimes interact with God. We ask God for what we want, and when we get what we want, we walk away.

Hosea 13:6 tells us about God’s interaction with the people of Israel. To summarize God’s relationship with Israel: *God fed them, and then they forgot Him.*

How often in your life has God given you what you wanted and then you walked away? How many times have you forgotten God right after He has fed you?

When all your prayers to God have to do with what you want from God, you can know for certain that you have begun treating Him like a vending machine. At the deepest level, this reveals our greatest love. It shows us that we do not love God as much as we love what God can give us. It shows us that what we love to do most is satisfy our own selfish desires. Our prayers often reveal our priorities.

Obviously, God is not a vending machine. He is far more than just a genie in a bottle that grants whatever selfish wishes you present before Him. Therefore, we should not treat Him like one. God does not want to deal with you *transactionally*, but *relationally*.

John 15:9 says, “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.*”

As the Father loves Jesus, so He loves all who have become His children through Jesus. The same love the Father has for Jesus, He has for you. This means that you can ask God for stuff because He cares about every detail of your life. He is a good Father who likes to give good gifts to His kids.

However, before you ask God for anything, take a moment to remain in His love. Realize that His love for you is all you need. To remain in God’s love means to simply rest in it. It means you stop asking for things and stop trying to accomplish tasks and simply be still and know that God loves you deeply. Just stand in His love by sitting under the waterfall of His grace. Let His unending love and care for you wash over all your fears, sins, and struggles. When you do that, you will not be treating God like a vending machine. Instead, you will be treating Him as the personal and loving Savior that He is.

Daily Practice: Set a timer on your phone for anywhere from five to ten minutes. During that time, turn off all notifications or noise and just sit in God’s love. Do not ask Him for anything but simply rest in His unending love.

“*God does not want to deal with you transactionally, but relationally.*”

Day 36

What Worship Really Is

“*Therefore, I urge, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship.*” -Romans 12:1

What is worship? When I ask most people this question their first thought normally has to do with music. We listen to worship music. We sing worship music. Now, worshipping through music is not wrong. However, it is not a holistic view of worship.

Romans 12:1 gives us a more holistic view of what worship really is. In fact, we learn two lessons from this passage about worship that can transform your life if you let them change how you worship God.

Lesson #1- Worship is always a response to God's mercy. Whenever you are worshipping God, you do not ever have the first word. God's words of love and mercy have already spoken over your life through what Christ accomplished on the cross. This takes a tremendous amount of pressure off your shoulders. Worship is not about you worshipping a God that is far off. Rather worship is always, "*in view of God's mercy.*" Worship is simply a response to God's radical love.

Chapters 1-11 in Romans give us the most detailed and beautiful descriptions of God's mercy in all of Scripture. To put it plainly, Romans 1-11 is all about how God's mercy is the good news that we do not receive the punishment we deserve because of our sins. Instead, God has mercifully decided to withhold His anger towards us and freely offer us forgiveness and relationship with Him forever.

We worship God because He already loves us. We do not worship God to get God to love us. When we view worship this way, it will become more of a joy rather than an obligation. It will become more of a delight rather than a duty. It will be a natural outflow of receiving God's love, rather than a forced and unwanted action.

Lesson #2- Worship is mainly about sacrifice. If worship is a response to God's mercy, then the natural question to follow would be, "What does worship actually look like?" According to Romans 12:1 our "*true and proper worship*" is to "*offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.*" This truth gives us a far more expansive and holistic view of what real worship is.

When you sacrifice your time to talk to someone who needs comfort or counsel, you are worshipping God.

When you sacrifice your money to give to someone who is in need or to further the mission of Christ's church, you are worshipping God.

When you sacrifice your career because you have decided Christ is calling you into a new career that will give you more time to spend with your family and serve the church, you are worshipping God.

When you sacrifice your reputation by telling people at work that you are a Christian, you are worshipping God.

When someone sacrifices their own life so that another can live, that is the highest form of worship.

I could go on longer, but I will stop here. You see, worship is not confined to a Sunday service, a Bible study, or even a quiet time with God in the morning. Worship is meant to invade your whole life!

Today, you can receive and reflect on the love of God and naturally respond in worship by sacrificing all of who you are to Him.

Daily Practice: What is a way you normally do not worship God? Take some time today to respond to the mercy of God by worshipping Him in whatever way you normally do not do.

“Worship is meant to invade your whole life.”

Day 37

When God Feels Far

Do you feel far from God? No matter how you feel today, the truth is that all of us go through times when we feel far from God. Today, I want to give you three simple steps that you can take when you feel far from God by going through Psalm 13, which is a prayer that David prayed to God when he felt far from God.

Firstly, be honest with God.

In Psalm 13:1-2, David starts out his prayer by asking God the following questions: *“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”*

On the surface, it may seem like David is not in a good place spiritually at this moment. However, that could not be further from the truth. In this moment of prayer David is being honest with God about his struggles, which is one of the marks of a thriving spiritual life. David is not trying to “fake it to make it,” rather he is openly and honestly expressing to God how he is feeling. In fact, he starts every question with, *“How long?”* which shows us that he had been likely feeling far from God for a considerable amount of time.

There will be not only days, but sometimes entire seasons in your walk with Christ when you feel far from Him. That is okay. You might be shocked for me to tell you this, but it is true. It is okay to feel far from God sometimes. Why? Because God is not a *feeling*, but a *personal being*.

Therefore, do not be shocked when you go through times of feeling far from God. Rather, be honest with Him and express how you are feeling to Him. When you do that, it will help you begin to feel close to Him again because you are allowing Him to enter into your struggle rather than just trying tough it out on your own. Being candid with God creates closeness to Him, so be honest with Him when you feel far from Him.

Secondly, ask God to give you clarity so that you can see Him.

Psalm 13:3-4 says, *“Look on me and answer; Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall.”*

David goes from being honest with God about his struggle to asking God to help him to overcome his struggle. He asks God to *“give light”* to his eyes. He feels far from God and does not want that to go on any longer. He wants to be able to see and experience God like he had in the past.

There are a lot of reasons why I love being the Lead Pastor of East Hills Church in the Oakland Hills. My favorite part of my job is the people. However, one bonus I have is our awesome church property. Our church property has one of the most beautiful views I have ever seen. We have a viewpoint spot that has a view of the Bay, Oakland, the skyline of San Francisco, the Bay Bridge, and the famous Golden Gate bridge. On clear days, I can see both bridges easily. However, on foggy or smoggy days it can be hard or impossible to see both bridges. As you already know, just because I cannot see the bridges because of smog or fog, does not mean that they no longer exist. My sight does not determine the existence of those two beautiful bridges.

In the moments when the fog of your feelings has clouded over your spiritual eyes, ask God to clear the fog for you. He has an ability to do that. He can show up and do anything at any time. If you ask God to clear the spiritual fog in your life, He may just answer that prayer. However, there are also times when He intentionally does not allow the fog to be lifted because He is wanting to test and grow your faith, which brings us to the third and final step to take when you feel far from God.

Thirdly, choose to trust that God is good.

Psalm 13:5-6 says, *“But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for He has been good to me.”*

At the end of the prayer, David chooses to trust God regardless of his circumstances or feelings. He chooses to trust God because of His *“unfailing love,”* and because He had been *“good”* to him. This gives us a key insight into what to do when we feel far from God.

If you cannot feel God today, trust God today for the goodness and love He has already poured out in your life in the past. Jesus has already showed you His unfailing love for you through His sacrifice on the cross. He loved you so much that He was willing to die for you. That is real love! The same God who loves you that much is in control of the whole universe. He is worth trusting, no matter how you feel. So, when you feel far from God, remind yourself of his goodness and love as you *“walk by faith, not by sight”* (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Today, you can choose to trust in God’s unfailing love for you, no matter how thick the fog that is in front of you is. When you do that, your faith will be strengthened, even when God feels far.

Daily Practice: Read Psalm 13 one verse at a time. After you read each verse, take a moment to pause and pray. Allow each verse to guide you as you honestly talk with the God.

“God is not a feeling, but a personal being.”

Day 38

A Passion to Proclaim

There is something very admirable about a person who is passionate about a cause. When it comes to the cause of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, I can confidently say that the most passionate person ever in that area is Paul. Here is a list of all the trials Paul went through while proclaiming Jesus to people:

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

What passion! Paul was so passionate about proclaiming the message of Jesus that all these trials could not stop him.

I must admit, when I read everything that Paul went through for the sake of proclaiming the gospel, I immediately feel guilty because I do not have nearly the same amount of perseverance and passion that he had for the gospel. The question is: “How did he have such a fire in his soul when it came to spreading the gospel all over the world?”

His passion came from a personal encounter with God’s love.

Paul’s previous life before being a preacher for Christ was as a killer who hunted down followers of Christ. However, that did not keep Jesus from Paul. Jesus appeared to Paul not to judge him, but to accept, change, and use him. Paul had a personal encounter with God’s love that completely transformed his life. That is why Paul would later say in 1 Timothy 1:15 that *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I am the worst of them all”* (NLT).

You see, the more you personally encounter the saving grace of God the more you will naturally proclaim the good news of Jesus to people in your life.

I have two key questions for you: Firstly, on a scale of one to ten, what is your current level of passion when it comes to proclaiming the gospel to others? Secondly, who is someone God wants you to proclaim the gospel to?

There once was a man named John Harper who was aboard the Titanic when it hit the iceberg. He was on board with his six-year-old daughter and one of his nieces. He ended up dying, and his family and friends did not know what his last words were. However, years later, a young man who was aboard the Titanic and survived shared what John's last words were.

The young man told the story that while he was floating in the freezing water that John was floating near him and asked him:

“Man, are you saved?”

He answered, “No, I am not.”

John replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

After John's short sermon while in the sea, he drowned to death in front of this young man. The words stuck in that young man's soul, and he surrendered his life to Christ.⁴

John spent his dying moment proclaiming the gospel. That is how passionate he was about Jesus! Like Paul, He was passionate about proclaiming Jesus because He had a personal encounter with His love. Today, you can not only know the love of Jesus personally but show the love of Jesus broadly to the people God has intentionally placed in your life.

Daily Practice: Reach out to someone today who does not know Jesus. Ask them out for coffee or a meal. During the time you spend with them, share Jesus with them. You can do it! You do not have to have all the answers. You just have to have enough courage to step out in faith and do it. I guarantee you that if you ask God for courage, He will give it to you.

“The more you personally encounter the saving grace of God the more you will naturally proclaim the good news of Jesus to people in your life!”

⁴ Dever, Mark. *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

Day 39

What Love Covers

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” -1 Peter 4:8

I remember when we were kids there were a group of pigs we would drive by on our way home. We always loved to look at them. These pigs were always covered in filth. Why? Because they are pigs and that is what pigs do. They sit and slide in filth for a living.

There are times in our lives when we feel completely covered in filth. We feel covered by our sin, our struggles, and our shame. Maybe that describes you right now. You feel covered by the filth of this world that you have let stain your soul.

Here is the good news. Your soul does not need to be stained any longer for *“love covers over a multitude of sins.”* You might say, “You do not know how bad my sin is nor do you know how many times I have sinned!” You are right, I do not know, but I do know this. The love of Christ which is demonstrated on the cross does not merely cover over some sins or a small number of sins. It covers a *“multitude”* of sins. We all have the tendency to feel ashamed of our sins not only because of what the sin is but because of how many times we have done it. We have not just slipped up in sin every once awhile. Rather, we have sinned continually. The reality is that we all have committed a *“multitude”* of sins. I want you to know this. Your continual frequency of sin does not scare God away from you. He runs toward you with a deep love that can cover all your sins. All you must do is simply open the door of your heart to His love by faith.

I want you to notice that God does not just want you to know this love individually. He wants you to show it to others communally. We are told to *“love each other deeply.”* Yes, God’s love can cover over the multitude of your sins. However, God’s love for you is also meant to empower you to love others so that you begin to forgive them. When Christ was on the cross, He shouted, *“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). How could Christ offer forgiveness to the very soldiers who had nailed Him to that tree? Love. There will be times when people in your life will deeply wound you. It is in those moments that you can forgive them as Christ has forgiven you. You can cover their sins with love as Christ has covered your sins with love.

In fact, I will let you in on a little secret. There is one main reason why my marriage has lasted as long as it has and will last until one of us dies. It is because *“love covers over a multitude of sins.”* Love is the only power capable of allowing you to push past the multitude of sins that others commit against you. It is this love that leads you to forgive someone even when they have wronged you time and time again.

Continual and repeated forgiveness is not easy. However, I want you to know a hard truth. There is no such thing as an unforgiving Christian. Christianity is not just about receiving God’s forgiveness, but freely giving God’s forgiveness to others too. Jesus takes forgiveness so seriously that He powerfully proclaimed that, *“But if you do not forgive others their sins, your*

Father in Heaven will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15). A forgiven person naturally become a forgiving person. A loved person naturally becomes a loving person.

Once your sins are completely covered by the love of God, you can begin to cover others with that same love. You did not earn God’s love so you should not make others earn your love. God’s love is freely given to you so you can now freely give others that same love!

Daily Practice: In prayer, ask God to reveal to you who you need to forgive. Then ask Him to empower you to forgive that person. If God leads you to do it, reach out to that person to let them know that you have forgiven them freely because Jesus has forgiven you freely.

“Once your sins are completely covered by the love of God, you can begin to cover others with that same love.”

Day 40

Life is All About Love

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’” -Matthew 22:36-40

Life is all about love. If your life is about anything else other than love, you missed the meaning of life. One day a man asked Jesus what the greatest commandment in the law was, and Jesus responded by giving him a simple yet profound answer. Jesus’ answer was that loving God and loving others is the greatest commandment.

1 John 4:19 says, *“We love because He first loved us.”* It is impossible to love God and others without first knowing how deep Jesus’ love is for you. God’s love for us is what births our love for Him and others. The only way your life will be marked by love is by beginning to understand how much Jesus loves you.

On your spiritual journey of following Jesus there will be times when you feel stuck in the road. You will feel like you cannot go any further in your love for God. It may even feel like your love for God has frozen. In those moments, the only way your cold heart can be warmed is through the love of God that is seen on the cross. To grow in love, you must know the deepest form of love. You must remember and reflect on the sacrificial love that was displayed on the cross. You must remember that God that was willing to lose His life so He could experience relationship with you. When you look to Jesus’ love for you, you will naturally love Him back. Do not look

to yourself if you want to love God more, look to His great love for you and you will find your love for Him stronger than ever before.

Now, God does not just want you to love Him. He wants you to love all people just as He does. Yes, the word *all* was not a typo. Jesus wants you to always love everyone, even those that have deeply hurt you. There will be times in your life when you will find someone deeply detestable. In your sinful flesh you may even wish that they would disappear from this earth. In those moments, there is no strength within yourself that you can conjure that will allow you to love the unlovable people in your life. The good news is that Jesus gives us the perfect example on how to love the unlovable. Romans 5:8 declares, *“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* When you feel like the lake of love in your soul has run dry and there is no more love that you possess to give to others, allow your soul to be filled by the great supplier of love. The God who died for you when you were still an enemy can empower you to love others when they seem unlovable to you. This is the great commandment. It is to love God with all that you are and to love others as you have been loved.

Now, I want to be clear. Loving God and loving others should be the main goal in your life, but it should not be the source of your hope. If you try to find your hope in your ability to love God and others you will be continually depressed and doubt your standing with God. You will never perfectly love God and others while here on this earth. Jesus is the only one with a perfect love. God’s acceptance of you is not based on your love for Him or others. It is only based on His love for you. Once you begin to personally know God’s love for you, you can begin the lifelong process of learning to love Him back and love others the way He loves you. You can be lifted by the love of Jesus so much so that you become a person of love. Today, you can make your life all about love!

Daily Practice: If this little book lifted your spirit up at all, I want to encourage you to gift it to whoever God puts on your heart. I wrote this book so as many people as possible could be lifted by the unconditional and unmatched love of God. May you continue to be lifted by God’s love for the rest of your life!

“It is impossible to love God and others without first knowing how deep Jesus’s love is for you.”

Recommend resources to help you continue to be lifted by love:

If you would like to watch some of the messages that I share with my church in Livermore on Sundays, you can find them on my church's website at arroyochurch.com.

Below is a list of some books that have helped me to be lifted by God's love over the years:

- *Prodigal God* by Timothy Keller
- *Morning and Evening* by Charles Spurgeon
- *God is my Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom
- *Experiencing God* by Henri Blackaby
- *The Pursuit of God* by A.W. Tozer
- *Desiring God* by John Piper
- *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen