

KNOWING GOD'S LOVE

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

BY STEVE DEMME

This book is dedicated to my ever supportive, always faithful, loving wife and my patient, forgiving, teachable sons, who learned along with me.

May it encourage all those families whose hearts have been turned towards God and towards each other.

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

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INTRODUCTION TO KNOWING GOD'S LOVE

This book is my journey of how God led me to understand the love of the Father and the grace of Jesus in a deeper way.

I firmly believe that comprehending God's unconditional love is the cornerstone for the overarching commands to love God and our neighbor, for we are unable to love until we have first been loved. "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) and "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us." (1 John 4:10)

Beginning in 2011, I rediscovered the most important commandment. The first, or as Jesus called it, the Great Command, is to love God with everything in me. As I thought about the importance of loving God, I realized I had rarely stopped to reflect if I did love Him. I was aware of believers in the church at Ephesus who had lost their first love (Revelation 2:4) and, not wanting to be like them, I began asking God to help me love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength

I was wonderfully surprised by how He answered my request. Instead of awaking one morning with a burning love for God, which is how I expected Him to answer, He began to steadily reveal how much He loved me. In 2012, I found myself believing God genuinely loves me. This knowledge that God likes me for who I am, and not based on what I do, has transformed my life.

My relationship with God is now much richer and deeper. My wife and I are closer than we have ever been and are enjoying a rebirth in our marriage. I am able to communicate and connect with my sons with honesty and openness. Knowing I am loved and accepted just as I am has freed me to be more transparent and real as I relate with others.

In the past, when I was asked to summarize my vision for the family, I would respond, "Where each lives for the other, and all live for Christ." With my eyes opened to the First and Great Command, loving God with everything in us, and the New Command, loving each other as God has loved us, I have revised my vision. I now believe a biblical vision for building a family of faith is: where each loves God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and all love each other as God has loved them. I also believe the only way to fulfill these two commands and build a godly family is to first be loved by God. We can only give what we have received.

If I only had time to deliver one message before I passed on to the next life, it would be that God likes His children. Whether I am addressing audiences or conversing with individuals, I have a strong desire to share this simple but profound truth: God not only loves us, but He also genuinely likes us.

Since this book was first published, I have added a one-hour talk on the same subject online. You may watch it here: buildingfaithfamilies.org/knowinggodslove/. Other material will continue to be added here in the future.

Prayer

As you read this book, it is my hope “that according to the riches of His glory, He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:16-19)

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

There are two preeminent, all-encompassing commands for every believer: love God with everything in us, and love others as we have been loved by God. Jesus refers to them as the First, or Great, Command and the New Command. I have learned I am unable to love God or others until I have first been loved by Him. “We love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) The degree to which I am loved by God determines my capacity to love God and others.

When I began to have my eyes opened to the importance of loving God, I realized I had not given much intentional thought to this fundamental command. I knew when Jesus was asked what the greatest command was, He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5. “He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment.” (Matthew 22:37–38)

I don’t ever recall asking myself if I did love Him, or to what degree, or how to demonstrate this love. This book is my journey of learning to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Following is a brief summary of each chapter to give you an overview of what you will be reading.

In **Chapter 1, Meeting Jesus**, God orchestrated several events to open my eyes to the need for improving my relationship with my heavenly Father. As I sought God for help in loving Him, He answered my requests, just not as I expected.

In **Chapter 2, God's Really Good News**, the scales continued to fall off my eyes as the good Spirit expanded my understanding of the gospel. I received new insights into the grace of God and the depth of the good news in not only taking away my sin, but in making me pleasing in His sight.

The verse which has meant the most to me on this journey, and which we will explore in **Chapter 3, as the Father Loved the Son**, is John 15:9: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." I must have read that chapter at least thirty-five times over the past third of a century, but I had missed this verse. As much as God the Father loves Jesus the Son, Jesus the Son loves you and me. Amazing.

"You do not have, because you do not ask." (James 4:2) A similar thought is expressed in John 16:24: "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." In 2011, I began asking the living God to help me comprehend His love. I regularly thought about Ephesians 3:14-19 as well as verses like these two from James and John. As I asked, God illuminated biblical truths to me in such a way that the eternal verities of the Word and the character of God came to life in a new way. **Chapter 4, inspired Illuminations**, has several of these experiences described, in hopes that they will bless you as they have blessed me.

Chapter 5, Embracing the Love of God with Truth, addresses transformation and truth. Jesus told a group of religious people that the truth would

set them free. They protested that they were already children of Abraham and did not need any help. I, too, thought I knew a good bit, but as I immersed myself in Scripture, the truth indeed transformed my thinking and set me free from unscriptural beliefs I held to.

Chapter 6, Acknowledging Baggage. We all have baggage. It is a lifetime collection of hard experiences, scars, wounds, rejections, and pain. Unfortunately, our stuff affects our ability to grasp God's pure love, and our view of God is distorted. Identifying these kinks and working through them opens the pipeline so more of His grace can reach us.

This is a portion of Paul's inspired prayer: "May [you] have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ." (Ephesians 3:18-19) Each blood-bought believer is a part of the body of Christ. We each supply something of value to the other members. We need each other's help grasping and comprehending the incredible dimensions of the love of Christ. I have been helped by wonderfully gifted people the world labels "disabled." I am happy to share what they have taught me about unconditional love in **Chapter 7, Comprehending with All the Saints.**

The last phrase of 2 Corinthians 13:14 also was brought to life: "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Other versions read, "the communion of the Holy Spirit." Because of this inspired phrase and other mentions of the Spirit in conjunction with

understanding eternal truths, I have entered into a new understanding and relationship with the Spirit. Upon further study, I believe Jesus was helping to fulfill His destiny with the fellowship of the Spirit, and I know I need His presence and power to be who God designed me to be. I am happy to share what I am learning about my new friend, the Comforter and Helper, in **Chapter 8, The Fellowship of the Spirit.**

Many times, I have attended a service where the preacher will knock on the podium and say something like, “God is knocking on the door of your heart, but it is up to each of us to open the door and invite Him to come in.” The verse which is quoted is found in the letter to the Laodiceans in Revelation 3:20. The assumption is that God is calling non-believers to receive Jesus as their Savior.

In truth, the passage is written “to the angel of the church in Laodicea.” It is possible for believers to let Jesus remain outside the door and not allow Him to come in and share a meal with us. We have the ability to keep Jesus at arm’s length. I have found that God desires a close walk with me, but it is up to me to let God love me by opening the door of my heart. Read more about this idea in **Chapter 9, Let God Love You.**

Throughout 2012, God gave me several tastes of His love. But the call of John 15:9 is to not merely taste and see that God is good, but to “abide in His love.” I discuss abiding in **Chapter 10, Abide in My Love.** To abide is the call of God to not simply have special forays into experiencing His affection, but

daily living and abiding at a different plane. I have found this takes work, the work of abiding.

Chapter 11, Come into His Presence, is a new approach based on Psalm 100 to taste and see that the Lord is good and meet with the Living God. I will share how God has led me in wonderful ways so that you will be encouraged in your walk with God.

Chapter 12, Greater is He that is in You, delves deeper into the power of the gospel. As much as non-believers need to hear the good news of salvation through Jesus the Christ, so too do those who are already believers. In this section I will be relating incidents and obstacles to receiving grace and my need for more good news! Perhaps there are obstacles keeping me from accepting the truth of His unconditional love. Maybe I am too hard on myself and unable to receive forgiveness. I have asked God to search me and know my heart and reveal areas of need which keep me from comprehending the truth.

We all recognize we live in a culture which has warped and twisted the way people look at love. This is perhaps an over-generalization, but parents are told to give their children every desire to show their affection. Yet in the divine economy, God reveals His love by disciplining us. This process, while not enjoyable, is nonetheless extremely loving and for our good in the long run. May God give us eyes to discern the heart of God while enduring the hard experiences of correction and discipline. In **Chapter 13, God is Treating You as Sons**, we remember, God is love, and He never changes.

In **Chapter 14, Why Knowing God's Love is Vital**, I will explore more about what it means to be rooted and grounded in the love of God. I also discuss many positive fruits I have experienced as a result of abiding in His love and burrowing deeper into grace.

Chapter 15, Loved to Love to Know is about the wonderfully surprising yet unlooked for fruit of being loved by God. The more I comprehend the divine affection of my Dad, my Brother, and my Friend, the more I am learning about God Himself.

CHAPTER 1: MEETING JESUS

When I was 14 years old, I was invited by my friend Kevin, who was my mischievous partner-in-crime from Sunday school, to spend a week at a ranch in Colorado. I didn't know anything about the camp except that the opportunity to attend was a really good deal. Kevin's aunt and uncle had offered to pay for him to attend the camp so he could hear the gospel. They also generously offered to pay for him to bring along a friend. I was the friend.

As a result, in the summer of 1968, I boarded a Greyhound bus in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and began a three-day journey to Colorado. I'd never been west of the Mississippi River. I didn't know anyone on the bus except Kevin. As I began to meet the other kids, I noticed a different spirit about them. I also found out we were headed to a Christian camp.

Interestingly, no one asked me if I was a "Christian" or a "believer." After years of attending Sunday school, I would have answered in the affirmative. At some point, I was asked if I had met Jesus. This question went to my heart, because I couldn't say I had. I knew about Jesus, but I had never had a personal encounter with Him, nor could I say I knew Him.

A significant factor in this life-changing week was the setting for the camp. The ranch was nestled in the Rocky Mountains, a two-hour drive south of Denver. I never tired of gazing at the panorama of the mountains and surrounding area. The landscape

had a profound effect on me and made me aware of God in a way I had never experienced. When I laid eyes on the Rocky Mountains, it expanded something inside of me. They are so majestic and awesome, and they made me aware of how big God is. "The invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity." (Romans 1:20 ASV)

During the meetings we all attended and our small get togethers in our cabin, I began learning about the different components of the Good News. I learned I could have my sins forgiven. This was very appealing, since I knew I was frequently in some sort of trouble. I had been suspended from school at age 12, and it seemed like I was always apologizing to someone for breaking something or throwing something at some neighbor's kid. At camp, I heard that I could have a new beginning. Later, I was taught more about sin and disobedience to God's law, but at this juncture, I simply wanted a clean slate and a fresh start.

I also heard that I would be able to know Jesus personally and talk to Him as if He were sitting next to me. Even though I had many acquaintances, I didn't have a really close friend or a bosom buddy. I was somewhat of a loner, even though I didn't like being truly alone. When I heard this part of the Good News, I knew I wanted to have a friend like Jesus. The Bible says He will never leave me or forsake me, so I would never be alone again.

I learned that if I invited Him into my heart, I would have eternal life and go to heaven. This part of the good news did not seem very applicable to me at such a young age, but it sounded good. However, what was most appealing was that by having Jesus take my sins away and be with me always, I would have a joy and a peace which was different and deeper than anything the world had to offer.

When I put all the pieces together, I thought, “Wow! Which part of this message isn’t good?” Now I know why “the gospel” means “the good news.” Yet, there was still a conflict in my soul. After some internal wrestling, I knew I wanted to respond to the gift Jesus was offering. The speakers at camp said Jesus was standing at the door of my heart gently knocking and desiring to come in, but it was up to me to open the door and invite Him in.

After a few days I made my way to a secluded part of the camp behind a little Swiss chalet on the side of a mountain. I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my heart. He answered my prayer, and I knew it. I don’t think I can explain how I knew, but I knew that He was real and that He had indeed come into my innermost being. This was the day when I invited Jesus to take up residence in my heart.

While I was at the camp, I learned a song entitled, “He’s Everything to Me,” by Ralph Carmichael. It was newly penned and not yet in any of the songbooks. Someone made copies on white mimeographed paper with purple letters. Older folks will recall this

kind of copy, which smelled so good when it was wet, just coming off the machine.

In the stars His handiwork I see,
on the wind He speaks with majesty.
Though He ruleth over land and sea,
What is that to me?

I will celebrate Nativity,
for it has a place in history,
Sure, He came to set His people free,
What is that to me?

Till by faith I met Him face to face,
and I felt the wonder of His grace,
Then I knew that He was more than just a God who
didn't care, who lived a way up there, and
Now He walks beside me day by day,
ever watching o'er me lest I stray,
Helping me to find that narrow way,
He's everything to me.

That song captured my encounter with Jesus. I knew there was a God "way up there," and I knew about Easter and Christmas, but in 1968, on a mountain in Colorado, I met Him face to face and experienced the wonder of His grace. My life has never been the same.

That fall, I entered high school and after three years, moved on to college. During those years I had some special times of sensing God's presence at Christian retreats and Young Life gatherings in people's homes, but I was not a committed follower of Jesus. I remember that during one meeting, the

speaker talked about all the things we run after to find fulfillment. Some try to acquire money as a way to be happy. Others think if they can find the perfect spouse, they will be content. And the list goes on: recognition, sports, cars, etc.

During my junior year at Grove City College, just north of Pittsburgh, I felt like I had everything the world had to offer. I was very involved in the life of the school, serving as president of my fraternity, vice-president of student government, and holding other offices. I had a beautiful girlfriend, ran my own business in the summers, and owned my own car. Life looked rosy on the outside. God was not very real to me, but it was because I had kept Him at arm's length. Yet, in my innermost being, I knew all this world had to offer did not satisfy my deepest longings. Behind the Swiss chalet in Colorado, I had tasted the reality of God. I had met Jesus. As good as my life looked on the surface, I was not satisfied and knew there was something, or Someone, more.

After my junior year, I applied to be a counselor at a camp in the Pocono Mountains working with troubled teens. In preparation for this job, I read *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson. Part of the way through the book, I stopped reading and prayed, "Okay God, here we go." It was not a long prayer, but God knew what I meant. I wanted to follow Jesus fully and seek first His Kingdom, not my own kingdom or the kingdom of this world. I believe this was the time when Jesus became not just my

part-time Savior and Friend, but my full-time Lord and Master.

My last year at Grove City College was a wonderful time of personal growth. I had four close Christian brothers: Dan, Joe, Rick, and Andy. We met regularly for Bible study and even organized a retreat for the men in our fraternity. Dr. Charles MacKenzie, the president of the university, and Dr. Bruce Thielemann, our chaplain, became lifelong friends and mentors. I was growing in my understanding of what it meant to serve God. My favorite verse became, "Seek first the kingdom." (Matthew 6:33) I was committed to serving God fully, and so when I graduated, I made plans to attend Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, to prepare for whatever field of service God opened for me.

Those few years of seminary flew by, and with my new bride, Sandi, I entered the pastoral ministry. We laid our life down to serve God by helping others. While living in a parsonage, God gave us four wonderful sons. We engaged in pastoral ministry, led summer camps for children and teens, opened our home to single adults and elderly saints, participated in summer Bible training for adults, served on the board of a children's home in India, and participated in the political process at our capitol, among other activities.

While I was seeking first the kingdom, over the years a little distance had entered into my relationship with my Lord. I didn't stop to articulate

what I was feeling, but rarely felt as if I were doing enough. No matter what I did, I felt driven to do more. Perhaps God was a little disappointed with me, as I had not lived up to His expectations. I thought I would never quite measure up and kept trying to do more to please Him.

God was certainly not as real or as intimate to me as He was when I first heard the good news in Colorado. When I heard the gospel many years prior, I had no question at all that Jesus loved me and wanted to have a relationship with me. I knew He was the loving father of the prodigal son, standing there with arms wide open to receive me as I asked Him into my heart.

My Relationship with God

I know I was saved by grace alone, but at some point, I began believing that God loved me more when I did more wonderful things for Him. Even though I knew in my head God's love for me was based on grace, which is unconditional, somehow, I thought He would love me more if I behaved better or if I did more for Him. Without being aware of this error, my relationship had subtly changed from unconditional love and acceptance, to God loving me and being pleased with me based on how I acted. Instead of a relationship rooted in what Jesus did, it now depended in part on what Steve did.

I had been sensing that I knew in my head that God loved me, but I wasn't experiencing this same love in my heart. An old proverb says, "The greatest

journey a man will ever make is the eighteen inches from his head to his heart.” I was aware of Scriptures which convinced me theologically of God’s care for me, but there is a big difference between head knowledge and heart understanding. I wanted to know in my heart and began to seek God. I asked Him to help me comprehend His love in a new way so I would believe in my heart what I knew in my head.

The Family is the Building Block

For over 30 years, I have been certain the family is the basic building block of the church and society. After creating the world in six days, God created what we know as family. He took one man and one woman, made them one flesh, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. This was before Abraham, before Israel, before Moses and the law. God designed the family. He crafted it. It was His idea.

I have studied the concept of family, designed small group studies for husbands and fathers, written a book about how to have family worship in your home, and made family my top priority in my own home. While I am aware that all families are dysfunctional to some degree, I am utterly convinced that if you genuinely want to transform a church or a town, creating more programs is not the answer. Instead, focus on helping families, because healthy families contribute to healthy churches, towns, counties, states, and countries.

As a youth minister, pastor, teacher, and summer camp director, I observed that committed families have a greater impact on the positive spiritual development of the children than special programs designed to reach the youth. Bottom line: you can't replace Mom and Dad.

I know, as a Christian husband and father, my primary calling is to love my wife as Christ loved the church and to raise my children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. When we first began discussing the idea of having a family business, I thought I was doing well as a husband and father. Even though I worked hard, my priorities were always intended to be God, family, work/ministry.

In 2011, I was addressing a group of parents at a conference in Alaska. I was speaking about teaching and training your children and referenced Deuteronomy 6:7: "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

After the session, a mom approached me and asked why I had left out the two preceding verses. I went back and read them. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart." (Deuteronomy 6:5-6)

Reading Deuteronomy 6:5-7, a heavenly light bulb went on for me. I saw the beauty and wisdom

of the order in which these verses were given, by inspiration of the Spirit, through Moses.

Reading these verses in the proper sequence makes so much sense. Before I can do an effective job teaching my children to love God, I must love God with all my heart, soul, and might. I cannot teach them to love His words until His words are on my heart. To be able to convey these truths diligently to my children, I must be applying them in my own life first. How could I have missed this crucial truth?

As I love God with everything in me and His words are uppermost in my heart, then and only then will my love for God and His Word spill out when I am talking, sitting, walking, and rising in my home. I saw that I needed to fulfill verses 5 and 6 before I could apply verse 7.

The Believers in Ephesus Misplace Their Priorities

I also knew it was possible for Christians to lose their first love, as was the situation in the Ephesian Church in Revelation 2:2-4. "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." These were believers in Jesus. They were the church, but they had misplaced their divine priorities, and the

fire of their love for God had dimmed to only a flicker.

Knowing the Ephesian church struggled to maintain their first love, I reread portions of Paul's letter to this same church for more insight into their spiritual condition. It seems they had a problem assimilating the grace and the love of God, which Paul addressed repeatedly in the letter to the Ephesians. In the second chapter, I found wonderful verses about unconditional love and the gift of grace.

“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”
(Ephesians 2:8–9)

With Deuteronomy 6 and the Ephesian Church in mind, I began to ask God to renew my love for Him and to help me to love Him with all my heart. I also discovered an inspired prayer in Ephesians 3:14–19, which I began to use in seeking God to transform my affections for Him.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Great Commandment

I knew God would answer my prayer, because it is His will for His children to love God. It is the first and greatest commandment, according to Jesus in Matthew 22:37-38. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

When we pray according to His will, He always hears us and answers. “This is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. If we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him.” (1 John 5:14-15) I was expecting an answer. I was surprised and pleased at how God would answer my request.

Prayer

Father, work deeply in our hearts. Quicken us by your Spirit to love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Save us from abandoning the love we had for you at first. Let the love of God be “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us,” (Romans 5:5) so we will not only know in our heads, but believe in our innermost being, the thoughts and affections you have for each of us as Your adopted children. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Note: The questions at the end of each chapter are to assist you in processing the information you have just read. Work through them for your own edification, talk them out with your spouse, or study

them in a small group setting, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20) May God bless you on your journey to know the love of God in a deep and richer way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What was your salvation encounter with God like? Write a few sentences or a paragraph detailing those moments. Whatever your experience, acknowledge it.
2. Can you identify with Steve’s statement, “No matter what I did, I felt driven to do more ... I thought I would never quite measure up and kept trying to do more to please Him”? Explain.
3. Why do you think believers struggle so much with thinking that God loves us more if we do more for him? Explain how that idea has manifested itself in your life.
4. Read Deuteronomy 6:5–7 slowly and thoughtfully. What do you think God wants to convey to His children here?
5. Read Ephesians 3:14–19 by yourself and/or with others. Ask the Lord to help you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Pray these prayers consistently for a few days, or weeks, or months.

CHAPTER 2: GOD'S REALLY GOOD NEWS

During this period, I recognized that I had difficulty believing God loved me for who I was and not because of what I did for Him. I have been blessed with a son who has Down syndrome. His name is fittingly John, which means **beloved**. John loves me. He begins his day by finding me when he awakens and giving me a hold (a long hug). He loves me because I am his dad: that's it. I love him because he is my son, period. We have a very special relationship and love each other deeply. We like to be together and enjoy each other's company. One of our favorite westerns is an old black and white TV drama called "The Rifleman." On the show, Lucas is a single dad raising his son, Mark. As we began watching these shows, I noticed that almost every episode ended with the father and son processing what lessons they had learned during their adventure, and then reconnecting at a deeper level. During these tender closing moments, John would often reach over to me and say, "You Lucas and me Mark." This was years ago, but he still brings it up when we meet someone. He will say, "Pop Lucas, me Mark."

The first thing John does when he gets up in the morning is to come and find Papa. He calls me Pop, he calls me Steve, he calls me anything he wants to call me. If I'm still in bed, he crawls in next to me and just snuggles. If I'm in my office, he finds me. If I'm reading my Bible, he'll get out his Bible. He can't

read and he doesn't speak clearly, but he wants to do what I am doing.

Now, I know my wife would say she loves me unconditionally, and my other sons would say they do as well. But in my thinking, I am convinced that if I'm a better guy and read more books on relationships and go to marriage seminars, Sandi will like me more. It's probably not true, but this is how I perceive it.

However, there is something unexplainably different about the way Johnny loves and accepts me. He doesn't care how much money I make. He is not impressed by what I do, or how effective a speaker I am, or whether I have accomplished anything. He just loves me, and I love him. We love each other for who we are and not for what we can or cannot do.

I don't know if this conveys enough of a description of our relationship, but my eyes are watering as I write this even now. The love John and I share is the closest I have come to experiencing unconditional love. One day, I finally articulated what had been going on in my heart and said, "Lord, I'd really like to know you love me like I love Johnny, not in my head, but in my heart of hearts." I knew in my head that God loves everyone, "for God so loved the world." (John 3:16) But there is a big difference between believing something and possessing a rock-solid conviction in your heart.

Answered Prayers

In the summer of 2012, I was surprised by how God chose to answer the prayers I had been praying. I wanted to love God, and I wanted to believe He loved me. I expected to awaken one morning with a divine quickening in my breast and find myself loving God and His Word with a renewed passion. Instead, He began revealing His love for me through a variety of Scriptures, sermons, songs, and other means. I remonstrated God and said, "This is not what I have been asking. I know you love me, but I want to love you more." Almost as soon as I uttered these words, it dawned on me; this is how God operates. "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

I was beginning to understand that the more I assimilated how much God loved me, the more I would love Him. My big takeaway was that God always takes the initiative. There are several Scriptures revealing this concept. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6–8)

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10) God is the one who seeks us. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10) We would never have asked

God to send His son to die for us. We didn't even know we needed Jesus to take our sins upon Himself. We were blind and lost. "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son." (Galatians 4:4)

Even Parents can Learn Something New at Camp

The next step in my journey was understanding more of the breadth and depth of the gospel. During the summer, my son John and I attended a Joni and Friends family retreat. We had been going to this camp since 2006 and always looked forward to attending. My first trip to camp was when I served as the camp pastor leading the morning devotions each day. Usually, the camp pastor would talk about a subject that had something to do with suffering or hope, since everyone at camp has a family member who is affected with some form of disability.

This summer proved to be different, but I was pleasantly surprised and wonderfully edified. The first morning we met, the pastor announced he would be speaking on the gospel. He was true to his word, and for the next three mornings, he expounded on one verse: "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The primary insight I received was about the gift of righteousness. I had known forgiveness was a gift from God, but as the pastor explained this single verse in detail, I saw that "in Him I might become the righteousness of God." Forgiveness and

righteousness are both free gifts of God. Jesus paid the price to forgive us our sins and clothe us in His righteousness.

When I asked Jesus to forgive my sins in the summer of 1968, He did. I later memorized 1 John 1:9 to help me cement this truth in my heart and mind: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Two other passages that reinforce forgiveness and are meaningful to me are:

"The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29)

"As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."
(Psalm 103:12)

I mistakenly believed that since Jesus had taken my sin and I had a clean slate, it was now my responsibility to build and extend the Kingdom of God. In this way, I would be doing good, righteous works to add to my personal account, and these works would help me be pleasing in His sight.

I had been taught about Christ's righteousness which cover us, but I had never grasped the breadth of this concept. I was understanding for the first time that in Christ, I have become the righteousness of God. It is not what I do that pleases God, but what Jesus has already done. When I saw this truth, I recognized that I didn't have to do anything to please God; I was already pleasing to Him because I

was in Christ. He had taken away my sin and clothed me in His robes of righteousness. I breathed a deep sigh of relief in my spirit when I heard this Scripture explained. Please let me share this wonderful truth as I understand it.

“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

There is so much within this one verse. The first three words are often overlooked. “For our sake” sets the stage for the rest of the passage. God loves us, and this is His motivation for enduring the agony of the crucifixion. I hope I never lose the wonder of God creating us, knowing us, and loving us. He desires our fellowship: “For our sake.”

He “made Him to be sin who knew no sin.” I knew only Jesus could take away our sins, since He had no sins of His own. He was the spotless lamb being sacrificed for our sins. What I grasped in a deeper way was the price the Father and the Son paid for Jesus to become sin.

Sin separates us from God. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God.” (Isaiah 59:2) In the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, they knew they were naked. They then hid themselves and tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. This is the effect of sin.

We all know the feeling of being alone, ashamed, naked, and wanting to cover ourselves, because we have all sinned. Sin is common to man. Conviction of

sin is an awful and universal sensation. When I first heard the gospel, the knowledge I could be forgiven was very attractive. I wanted a clean slate. I had been a boy who was usually in some sort of trouble, and the thought of having a fresh start resonated with my 14-year-old heart.

Since I have frequently committed sins against God and other people, I have tasted separation and conviction, and I don't like it. Conviction is unpleasant and distasteful. Many times, I have had to ask forgiveness of God and others. Sin and its effects are not pleasant.

Jesus had never known sin, conviction, or separation, for He had never sinned. Our camp pastor commented there was probably no one more unprepared or ill-equipped to be made sin than Jesus. I hope you will think about this statement. The unique sinlessness of Jesus, which made Him the only one qualified to bear our sin, also made Him the only one who had never tasted the fruit of sin, which is separation from our Holy God.

Consider how close and intimate the Father was with His Son. They had enjoyed uninterrupted harmony for eternity. Perhaps reading this portion of Proverbs will help you get a glimpse of their unique relationship. The writer describes creation from the perspective of Wisdom interacting with the Creator. I see Wisdom as Jesus and the Creator being the Father. These Scriptures may or may not refer to Jesus and the Father, but they portray two people who were daily each other's delight, which is

certainly an accurate depiction of our God and His only begotten Son.

“The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His work, the first of His acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before He had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When He established the heavens, I was there; when He drew a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when He established the fountains of the deep, when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him, like a master workman, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.” (Proverbs 8:22–31)

When Jesus became sin on the cross, darkness descended. These two kindred spirits, who had been one since before time and had only experienced perfect love, harmony, and connection, were now separated because of our collective sin. Jesus was alone for the first time ever. The Father turned away because of our sin for the only time ever.

The most painful phrase ever uttered, and one which continues to break my heart every time I read it, is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Matthew 27:46) The sinless, immaculate, all-loving, all-righteous Father had to turn His back on His precious Son because He was made sin on our behalf.

Some scholars surmise this heart-rending cry was heard echoing from one end of eternity to the other. Scripture supports this conclusion, for "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

Just as I cannot fathom the love they shared, I am unable to comprehend the pain of their separation. They, Father and Son, endured this agony for us. They paid the highest price so we might have our sins removed and be in fellowship with them. "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us." (John 17:20-21)

As I type these words, I am in reverent awe and want to be still. He took our sins and tasted the desperate separation and fruit of sin for us. This truth alone is enough to inspire eternal worship. And there is more good news in the second half of the verse: "that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

When our speaker began to have us consider each word in this phrase, he had a white board on a stand brought to the front of the room and asked the audience to help brainstorm. We attempted to document the righteous acts of Jesus on earth. He cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead,

fed the multitudes, cleansed lepers, preached words of life, died for our sins, prayed for us, blessed children, and forgave the woman taken in adultery. “There are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25)

The second part of 2 Corinthians 5:21 reads, “So that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Because He was made sin for us, we receive forgiveness as He takes our sin upon Himself. These two words “in Him” make us know we also have become the righteousness of God. His righteousness has been attributed to us.

I knew this concept of imputed righteousness theologically, but when we specifically rehearsed the righteousness of Jesus and all His righteous deeds, I was able to grasp this truth in a new way.

When we receive the gifts of God, which are eternal life and forgiveness of sins, and choose to follow Jesus in baptism, Scripture teaches that we are “in Him” and “in Christ.” (Philippians 3:9, Galatians 3:26) When we are baptized, we are “baptized into His death.” (Romans 6:3) According to Colossians 3:3, “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Clothed

Think back to the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned. They were naked and ashamed. God then killed an animal and fashioned a garment

to cover them. Jesus was slain for our sin, and His righteousness now covers us like the animal skin (perhaps a lamb fleece) covered the first parents. When we are clothed in Christ, we are covered with His righteousness. When our Heavenly Father looks at us, He sees Jesus.

There is a picture of a similar transaction in Zechariah, where the prophet was given eyes to see heavenly realities. "Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' And to him he said, 'Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.' And I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments." (Zechariah 3:3-5)

Isaiah 61:10 enhances this picture, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness." (NASB)

Credited

In Christ, we have become the righteousness of God. Not only is forgiveness from sin a gift of God, but the righteousness of Christ a gift as well. All the righteous acts of Jesus have been credited to our account. When God looks at us, He sees on our record that we cast out demons, raised the dead, healed the sick, and fed the multitude.

It helps me to think of this crediting of accounts with a bank illustration. Let's imagine I receive a monthly statement that says I have a debt the size of the U.S. government's debt. My first thought is that the bank has made a mistake, but when I call to check, the numbers are accurate. I am then filled with a sense of hopelessness, as there is no possible way I could ever pay off this debt.

The next statement comes and shows that someone named J. Christ has paid my debt, and I now have a zero balance. The relief I experience is indescribable and worthy of my thanks for eternity. A chorus by Ellis J. Crum that I learned years ago describes my gratitude:

I had a debt I could not pay,
He paid the debt He did not owe, I needed someone,
To wash my sins away.
And now I sing a brand new song,
"Amazing grace," Christ Jesus paid the debt,
That I could never pay.

As happy as I now am with a zero balance, I almost don't want to open the next bank statement when it arrives, but when I do, I find there has been a large amount of money deposited. The depositor is the very same J. Christ, and the statement says all His assets have been transferred into my account. I am speechless. This is what it means to receive the gift of forgiveness as well as the gift of righteousness.

"It was also credited to [Abraham] as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake

also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” (Romans 4:22–24) “For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:17)

Here are several more Scriptures to cement our understanding of this truth:

“This Good News tells us how God makes us right in His sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’” (Romans 1:17 NLT)

“Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.” (Romans 5:1 NLT)

“We know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.” (Galatians 2:16 NLT)

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”
(Philippians 3:8-9)

Perhaps this is old news to you, but it was new news for me. I had mistakenly believed righteousness was something I did, not something that Jesus had already done. Thank God for teaching this “old dog” the wonderful truth that the “abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” are found only in Jesus.

Prayer

“For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe.” (Ephesians 1:15-19)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. There are an abundance of Scripture passages in this section. Which one(s) did the Spirit impress on your heart? Write out or meditate on this truth for a few days.
2. This chapter emphasizes righteousness as God's gift to you: "In Christ, we have become the righteousness of God." Picture two contrasting images. One person is saved and focuses on doing everything possible to please God. Every day he prays, "God help me to do something for you today. Help me to reach out and touch others." The other person is also saved and rejoices every morning, "God, You have made me righteous and You like me! Help me love You, bask in Your love, and share Your love." What differences do you notice? With which person do you most identify? Explain.
3. Meditate on the phrase that Jesus cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Try to put yourself in Jesus' sandals, and feel what it must have been like to be separated from His Dad, close-knit as their relationship was.
4. Think and write about what it means that "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Jot a list of the righteous acts that Jesus did here on earth and consider how they apply to you, since your life is hidden with Christ in God.
5. Is the message of this chapter, "righteousness from God that depends on faith," old news to you, or new news? Explain how.

CHAPTER 3: AS THE FATHER LOVED THE SON

During this season, God was revealing more of His love to me, and I learned more of the power of the gospel to make me pleasing in His sight by taking my sin and clothing me in His robes of righteousness. One Scripture was especially used by God to reveal how much He loved me. Since 2012, this is now my favorite verse: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” (John 15:9 NIV)

Those inspired words penetrated my heart, and I began to comprehend how much Jesus loves me and you. Our Savior is speaking to His disciples when He says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” I stopped to ponder this one verse, and while several insights have emerged since this time, at that stage in my journey, I received one simple and profound message: Jesus loves me as much as His Dad loves Him.

From reading the gospel of John in particular, I have noticed several times the unique and special relationship shared by the Father and the Son. I think one event and one sentence sums up their relationship: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

“After His baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on Him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is

my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”
(Matthew 3:16–17 NLT) I have a picture hanging in my room of the Son of God looking up to the heavens after He heard these words from heaven. His face is beaming. I am moved just looking at this glimpse of their love for each other.

Jesus was affirmed as God’s Son.

He belonged to God.

Jesus was not only a Son;

He was a dearly loved Son.

Jesus was a beloved, well-pleasing Son

Who brought His Father great joy.

What makes their relationship so meaningful to me is that when I couple the words at this baptism with the words of Jesus to His followers in John 15:9, the implications are profound.

Since Jesus loves us JUST AS His Father loved Him, then as adopted children of God, Jesus loves us exactly the same way His father loved Him. Because of Jesus, we are God’s dearly loved children who bring Him great joy. I hope you are able to assimilate and make this truth your own.

It is my hope that as we study each part of this divine benediction from the heart of the Father to the heart of His Son, our assurance of God’s love for us will grow and deepen. Remember that “we love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) The more we are helped to comprehend His love for us, the more we will love Him!

“This is My Beloved Son.”

With these five words, Jesus knew He belonged. He was God’s Son. When we turn to the Lord and are born from above, we are adopted into the family of God. God becomes our Father and we become His children. Read through these passages slowly and prayerfully. Ask the Spirit of God to quicken one or more passages which are especially encouraging to your heart. Highlight, underline, rewrite, or memorize one or two. We are each on a unique journey, and God is working in special ways through different verses to make us know we belong to Him.

We are Children of God

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Beloved, we are God’s children now.” (1 John 3:1–2)

“You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes.” (Galatians 3:26–27 NLT)

“You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.” (1 Corinthians 3:23 NLT)

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:4–6)

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:15–17)

Beloved Children

When Jesus was affirmed as God’s Son at His baptism, He was also informed that He was beloved. I imagine the heart of Jesus warmed at this loving expression from His Dad, for these are words every child wants to hear from their Dad. There is deep feeling and tenderness in this expression. You belong to me, and I love you to pieces. You are my beloved Son.

Notice that God loved Jesus for who He was and not based on what He had done, for Jesus was just beginning His ministry. He had not fed the five thousand, or healed lepers, or raised the dead. This is a wonderful example of unconditional love.

Now take a deep breath, put on your faith boots, and recall that “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” (John 15:9)

Based on this verse, we know and believe we are loved as Jesus was loved. The same way the Father divinely and unconditionally loves His boy, He also loves each of His adopted children.

The first topical study I did in 2012 was about the unconditional love of God. Even though I had

been a follower of Christ for many decades, I had begun to incorrectly think that God loved me more if I engaged in more activities for Him. I surmised God was more pleased if I read my Bible every day, was a regular attendee at church, and served at Christian camps, etc. While all of these activities are profitable, they do not increase His love for me. God loves me, period. I am His adopted son. If I did nothing but sit in a chair all day, His love would not change. There is nothing I can do to make God love me more. Neither is there anything I can do to make God love me less. God is love.

I have to invest time and effort into believing this fundamental truth. Here are several passages that have helped transform my thinking to line up with the Word of God:

“By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us.” (1 John 3:16)

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” (1 John 3:1)

“God showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.” (1 John 4:9–10 NLT)

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

“God shows [demonstrates/reveals] His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:4–8)

“God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” (John 3:16–17)

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

Beloved Children who Bring God Great Joy

I have already mentioned in chapter one how transformative was the knowledge that I am clothed with Christ and have become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Because of Jesus, my heavenly Dad looks on me, smiles, and declares, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” (Matthew 3:17 NLT)

When I read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, I no longer focus on the sad, repentant son, but on the running father, whose tear-stained face lit up

at the sight of his son returning home. I believe that is the welcome we receive every time we come into the presence of God. He greets us with a warm smile, and His face lights up to have us near to Him. These Scriptures have helped me grasp this truth.

“A voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’”
(Matthew 3:17 NLT)

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:17–18)

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

“I am my beloved’s, and His desire is for me.”
(Song of Solomon 7:10)

“This I know: God is on my side!”
(Psalm 56:9 NLT)

Tested in the Wilderness

Jesus was the most grounded person who walked this earth. When the Son of God graduated with honors from the training God uniquely designed for Him – long walks by the Sea of Galilee, many hours laboring with His Father, and learning the sacred Scriptures – He headed to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. After He emerged from the water, He was given the best presents any graduate could receive: a divine accolade from His Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit. God affirmed for all the

world to hear that this was His boy and that He was pleased with Him.

The training period was over, and He was ready to begin His ministry. He had the blessing of His Dad and the presence of the Holy Spirit. His first assignment was to be led into the wilderness for forty days and nights of fasting and then to be tempted. At the end of this time of testing, He went from feeling on top of the world to being vulnerable. Not having eaten for over a month, the devil attacked Him at the point where He was most susceptible.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’” (Matthew 4:1–3)

Whenever I read this account, I would focus on hunger and bread, but notice the first six words out of the liar’s mouth: “If you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 4:3)

Our archenemy knows where to strike. The real battle was not directed towards Jesus’ appetite but His identity. God the Father had just told Jesus in a voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son,” and now the deceiver was implying He wasn’t. It was a subtle and deadly ploy. Jesus successfully resisted the temptation by employing the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by

bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)

Jesus successfully warded off two more temptations, and the devil left Him alone. Jesus knew who He was. He was the Son of God, the Messiah.

Tested at Home

Jesus was tested further when He returned to His home country. When Luke sets out to write an accurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus, he moves from the temptation in the wilderness to the town of Nazareth in Galilee.

“When the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about Him went out through all the surrounding country. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up.” (Luke 4:13–16)

Then, as was His habit, He read the Scripture to all who were gathered on that Sabbath. “And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty

those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" (Luke 4:16–19)

I imagine a hush came over the people as He "rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' And all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth. And they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' And He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.' And He said, 'Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown.'" (Luke 4:20–24)

A person's hometown is the toughest place to begin a ministry. However, Jesus was rooted and grounded in the knowledge that He was the Son of God. He knew, even if His neighbors and childhood friends didn't, who God said He was. He did not need their affirmation nor their encouragement. They marveled at His words and His repose, but whether they believed in Him or not, He knew who He was down deep in the core of His being.

Our Temptation is Common to Man

The enemy of our souls is the same as the enemy of our master, and he knows where we are susceptible. When guilt and condemnation are no longer effective, he attacks our identity and who we

are in Christ by casting doubt on whether we are truly children of God. Just as Jesus responded to these barbs from hell with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, we too need to quote Scripture to combat the same accusations.

God has sent His Spirit to communicate with our Spirit that we are children of God. We are His kids, His beloved children. No matter how we feel, what we have done, how much time we have spent praying or reading the Word, or what kind of spouse or parent we have been today, we belong to Him. He is our Dad – our Abba Daddy.

If you need more ammunition to ward off the stench of the deceiver, consider this powerful affirmation of God being for us!

“Those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or

persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:29-39)

Adopted, Beloved, Pleasing Children of God

Knowing we are children of God is our birthright and our identity in Christ. It is not simply another edifying truth, but central to who we are and how we are. I was battling a temptation recently and wondering what I would do if placed in a compromising situation. I sensed God communicate to my spirit to not yield because, "Thou art my son!" I was blessed and strengthened by this powerful affirmation, for I am in Christ and have been adopted into the family of God. I am, indeed, a child of God and have taken on the persona and characteristics of my Savior and my Dad. We have been born from above. We have been grafted into the family of God. He is our Dad. Knowing this in the marrow of our being transforms and purifies us.

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know

us is that it did not know Him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure." (1 John 3:1-3)

"To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

Prayer

May God's Good Spirit witness with our spirit that we who have been born from above are truly children of God. May He write these truths on our heart so we might know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are His and He is ours. In the name of our Brother Jesus, Amen. (Matthew 12:49, 2 Corinthians 3:3)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Which of the Scriptures that speak of God loving us as He loved His Son resonate with your heart and mind?
2. What does it feel like to be an Adopted, Beloved, Pleasing Child of God?
3. Which passages would you like to have memorized so you could effectively wield the sword of the Spirit?
4. How did Satan attack Jesus' identity, and how did Jesus win against His enemy's lies?
5. Knowing your identity in Christ is a crucial part of fulfilling God's purpose for you on earth. Therefore, Satan will do everything he can to bring doubt and uncertainty about your identity to your mind and heart. According to this chapter, how do you combat the enemy's lies?

CHAPTER 4: INSPIRED ILLUMINATIONS

God is so faithful. He patiently has been teaching me more about His love and continually revealing more about His nature and character. I was trying to take in these wonderful truths and affirmations but would still struggle. When I found myself slipping back into old patterns of thinking and needed more encouragement from God, I cried out to Him for help and encouragement. God likes being asked. In this chapter, I chronicle several instances when God wonderfully answered my requests.

You are about to read about two very specific times when God wonderfully met me: first in my car, and then in my kitchen. These occurrences were precious and extraordinary. Since then, I have had several similar experiences with the living God. These were times when God revealed Himself or some aspect of truth to my heart in a way which was unlike anything I had known or tasted heretofore. When speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus said, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

I believe any dream, vision, or revelation God brings to us should be examined and found to be consistent with the inspired Word of God. I have decided to call these precious times “illuminations,” because each one of these divine communications has illuminated scriptural truths to me. I share them

with you in the hope they will encourage you as much as they have helped me.

Perhaps God knew I would need extra help and grace going into a critical time in my life, and He gave me this special dispensation to carry me through a rough patch. Whether He sovereignly intervened in my life with these illuminations, or if He was answering the prayers of my faithful brothers and sisters in Christ or cries from my own desperation, these divine encounters encouraged and sustained me through difficult times. In Psalm 46:1, we read, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” He was certainly a very present help when I was in trouble!

Not only did these experiences illuminate scriptural truths, but they also revealed God Himself to me in a marked way. I didn’t simply learn more about God; I was enabled to know the living God Himself. His character and nature were revealed. I am struggling to put this into words, but I was meeting and interacting with the person of God. As you read these accounts of precious times I have experienced, I hope you will be edified by the truths which were illuminated. May the good God, whom we serve and love, also be revealed.

In the Car

It was a particularly difficult family board meeting. After some painful deliberations and a vote, I felt as though I had just lost my family, my business, and my ministry in a half hour. I was alone,

lost, and without a compass. My world as I knew it had just been shattered. I left the meeting room and stood in the next room leaning up against a large window, sobbing from depths I did not know I possessed. I was suffering from the worst pain I had ever experienced.

Two of my sons saw my agony and came to hold me, but I put up my hand to keep them from embracing me. I didn't know where the pain emanated from nor did I know why I resisted their efforts to comfort me. The following January, as I was reading in Genesis, I noticed the account of Jacob receiving news that Joseph was dead. I found comfort seeing Jacob's response when in similar straits. "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted." (Genesis 37:35)

I stood staring out the window trying to find some equilibrium. Finally, I was able to gather myself, and I walked to my car. It was there I was able to pray, "Oh God, help." I sat gazing heavenward and saw God looking at me. As I sensed His eyes upon me, this verse went through my mind: "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My Word." (Isaiah 66:2 ASV)

God met me in the car, and His presence and personalized attention were never needed more. I didn't feel anything, for I was numb, but knowing He was looking at me was reassuring. He was still on His throne, and He cared. That afternoon in April

was the beginning of the hardest, and in retrospect, the best year of my life.

In the Kitchen

A few months later, on a beautiful Sunday in July, I reached one of the lowest points of my life. I was unable to encourage myself in the Lord. Regardless of what Scriptures I read or what uplifting music I listened to, I was still in the slough of despond. I had been trying to fight this battle by myself for several months, and this day, I finally ran out of gas. While I was in this dark place, I sent out an email to thirty friends asking for help. These brothers and sisters in Christ began to pray and reach out to support and encourage me.

Perhaps what happened two days later, on Tuesday morning, was an answer to the prayers of my support team, or maybe God sovereignly knew this was the right time. Whereas Sunday was the nadir of the summer, Tuesday morning was the beginning of my healing and recovery.

That morning I was feeling pretty good. I had just finished a hearty breakfast and was listening to uplifting Christian music while reading a Christian book exploring the biblical roots of the Twelve Step Approach. I was standing in the middle of the kitchen when I sensed Jesus was standing next to me. He communicated one sentence to my spirit that changed the way I viewed my relationship with Him.

The specific words belong to only me, but I can share that in that one sentence, He made me know

that He made me, He knew me, and He formed me in my mother's womb. I had been designed to do what I do, and He liked me just the way I was. I began to laugh out loud.

I had been feeling so worthless that I was wondering if I needed a personality transplant. Perhaps I should reinvent myself. In one blessed sentence, Jesus affirmed my identity and personality, built me up, joked with me, and conveyed His pleasure in me. This was the first of several encounters I had with Spirit of the living God that summer. I am still amazed at how He could pack so much important information into one sentence, but He is God, and He knows me, and He knew just what I needed to hear. For He is the one who created me, made me in His image, and formed me in my mother's womb.

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb....My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret.... Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:13–17)

Further Illuminations: No Baggage

Even after this wonderful visitation by the Spirit of Jesus in the kitchen, I still had to seek God daily.

One morning, I awakened, and God seemed like He was a million miles away. My first thought was that I should read one of the studies I had made about how God never leaves us or forsakes us, or something similar. I considered playing some good music and worshiping God while I read my Bible, but I didn't have the energy. Instead, I said out loud, "Do you still love me as much today as you did yesterday?" I wasn't feeling very reverent or respectful and simply didn't have the energy to seek God.

God graciously answered my request by giving me a picture. I saw Jesus standing on the clouds with blue sky all around and His arms spread wide. I pictured Him standing in the clouds as I was looking from a window in a commercial jet. He was laughing as He said, "Of course I do. I don't have any baggage."

As soon as I saw this image and understood these words, I wondered if this was a scriptural image. I thought of 1 John 4:1, which says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." I prayed and asked God if this was from Him, and as I did, several Scriptures came immediately to mind confirming the validity of this illumination.

God is light.

"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."
(1 John 1:5)

God is love. He is not loving; He is love.

“God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1 John 4:16)

God never changes.

“I the Lord do not change.” (Malachi 3:6)

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

Paul said that we have this treasure in jars of clay (1 Corinthians 4:7). In other words, we are susceptible to changes in weather, our emotions, how much sleep we have had, and whether we have eaten a good breakfast. We are fragile creatures dependent on many variables. God, however, is always light, always loving, and He never changes. He is the great, unchangeable I Am.

One aspect of this image that I appreciate is that at 30,000 feet, the sky is always blue and the clouds are always white, while on the ground, it can be cold, windy, gray, and raining. When you get high enough, the jet breaks through the clouds, and all is light, for it is God's country.

We are given a picture of life in that world in Revelation 21:22-23: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”

I was curious about His arms being spread wide. So, I asked Him what the arms meant. Notice that I asked. I do not think I would have received so many insights and special experiences during this season

of my life unless I had done a lot of asking and seeking.

You may think that the arms were from Jesus on the cross, but instead, God made me know they represented the father of the prodigal son. When the wayward son came around the corner looking bedraggled and smelling of pigs, the father ran down the street and embraced his son. This image still touches my heart. When we come close to our Dad, He has the same response. He opens up His arms and, with a warm smile, welcomes us and gives us a big bear hug. That is our Dad.

“He arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

I am assuming that you know the story of the prodigal son. If not, consider reading all of Luke 15. I used to read this chapter noticing the wayward younger brother and the whining older brother. Now when I read it, I focus on the compassionate, loving father who welcomed his younger son with open arms, then kindly loved his eldest son, even though he whined and complained. Our Dad loves His children in whatever condition we find ourselves.

No Baggage

I am still mulling over the expression, “I don’t have any baggage.” It is important to recognize that God doesn’t have any personal issues. He does

not have sleepless nights, or grumpy moods, or hormone changes. He is the same all the time.

However, we each have scars and hurts from our past. It can be difficult to acknowledge our own stuff because it hurts, so we guard our woundedness and cover up our brokenness. I asked God once why I liked some people easily, while I had to work at being able to love others. He made me know it is our own pain which hinders us from loving and connecting with others.

If we really knew and understood people, could see past their defenses, and weren't afraid to acknowledge our own issues, we could love everybody. We are all broken to some degree, and we seek to cover up our own issues. Our baggage is what reacts with the baggage of others and keeps us from loving our neighbors as ourselves.

I think of this special experience frequently, because part of my baggage is that I have trouble believing that God likes me and is always smiling when I approach Him in prayer. I struggle with seeing God, just like the father of the prodigal son, always standing in the street with arms spread wide, seeking to embrace me when I draw near to Him. Even though this is the image Scripture conveys to my mind, I have had trouble believing it applied to me.

However, God is faithfully helping me, and these truths are sinking into my heart and becoming a part of me. Now, when I lie in bed processing the day, or when I first awake, I think of my Dad standing there

with His arms wide open, smiling, laughing, and happy to see me and hear what is on my heart. God is good in every way, and He loves His children to pieces, all the time.

I Miss You Too

A few summers ago, I was speaking at a family camp over the Labor Day weekend. That Sunday morning, I had been teaching about the most painful part of the crucifixion, when Jesus uttered these words out of abandoned agony: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

I know the nails and the physical torment of hanging on a cross are accompanied by incredible pain, but I think the hardest part for Jesus was being separated from His Father for the first time in eternity. Father and Son had been one since before time. They loved each other completely, thoroughly, and fully. They had never been anything but one in spirit and mind. Theirs was, and is, the perfect relationship.

“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) Jesus, the pure lamb, the sinless Son of God, became sin for our sake. Sin brings separation. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2)

Our sin caused Jesus to suffer in a new way. While He was uniquely prepared to bear our sin,

He was emotionally ill-equipped to experience His Father turning His back and not hearing His cry. As humans, we know all too well what it feels like to have sin impact our relationships with each other and with our God, but Jesus did not. He had never sinned. He had never been estranged. He and the Father were always one.

Later that Sunday afternoon, I was preparing for the evening session and contemplating the price Jesus paid for bearing my sin. I was also remembering the many times when I had sinned and felt separated from God. During these times, I missed God and His presence. As I was walking across a grassy lawn below the chapel, God whispered to my heart, “I miss you too.”

I stopped, and my eyes began to fill with tears of gratitude and appreciation as these words sunk into my heart. God loves me so much that when I sin, He misses me. Our Dad likes to be with us and enjoy our fellowship. God really does like His children. Our relationship with our Heavenly Father goes both ways. We love Him, and He loves us. Without Jesus bearing our sin, we could not know the joy of being in harmony with our Dad.

A Stone House

One wintry day, I was driving through Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania on the way to the Philadelphia Airport for a flight to Vermont. On my left was a beautiful stone house made of grey granite. It was also for sale. I would estimate that it was built in the

1700s or 1800s, and I thought it was gorgeous. I really like granite houses, and when I saw this one, it struck a deep chord in my heart. There are not many things that I would like to own, but I had a strong desire to buy this house or one like it.

I started scheming in my mind how I could afford to purchase it and reasoned that since I was approaching retirement age, maybe I could sell our current house and buy this one. I considered a home equity loan and almost turned around to get a better look at it and write down the real estate information. All of these thoughts took just a few seconds. Then it occurred to me to talk to God about this yearning.

God had continued to be near whenever I approached Him in prayer, so I asked Him, "Why do I like stone houses so much?" As soon as I verbalized this prayer, God communicated to me, "I'm building one for you, and I know you better than you know yourself. It is going to be awesome." The thought I received was that God is the divine architect. Since He knew what I really wanted in a home, He was designing one to fit my unique specifications. He was building it, and even though I didn't fully know what I wanted in a house, He did.

He also made me know He was joyfully looking forward to showing it to me when I got to heaven. Several Scriptures came to mind.

He knows me better than I know myself.

"o Lord, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out

my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.” (Psalm 139:1-4)

He is preparing a place for me.

“In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:2-3 ASV)

He is exceeding my expectations.

“As it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him.’” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Since this encounter with God, I have lost the desire for a stone house. I no longer dream about owning a granite structure in this lifetime, because my Dad is making me one, and I can’t wait to see it. I still like stone structures, and they catch my eye when I drive past them, but the strong desire is gone, replaced with the anticipation of seeing the one He is making for me.

His Father Saw Him and Felt Compassion

John was sleeping in the passenger seat as we were driving on the Pennsylvania Turnpike towards New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, to meet my friends Andy and Dr. MacKenzie. I was listening to the song called “Abba Father” by Steve Fry. I had a picture in

my mind of an overview of my life in which I was always busy doing things, with lots of friends and activities. In the background, silent and very large, was God, always present and patiently seeking to draw me to His bosom.

I saw Him as a large, loving Dad, a huge Being surrounded by the clouds, watching and yearning to have a heart relationship with me. He has observed all of my hurts, known all I have gone through, and watched the people I have been with. Yet He was always present, but in the background. This knowledge that He has always been with me, and in His gentle way has patiently drawn me to Himself, brought tears to my eyes. I still weep at the concept and the reality of the love and care of my Father.

I have always missed having an intimate relationship with my dad as a child, which I'm sure contributes to how much I still long to be seen, known, and embraced by my Abba Father.

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man... He is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In Him we live and move and have our being.’” (Acts 17:24, 27–28)

“[There is] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:6)

“He arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

He Sees Me

For our 35th anniversary, Sandi and I made a special trip to Mackinac Island, Michigan for the annual Lilac Festival. The first few days, we rode bikes, took a tour of the island, hiked to the fort to see the sunset, and took in the primary attractions. After we had a good sense of what the island had to offer, we then spent a day or two pursuing our own separate interests.

Because I like history, I headed for the stone walls of Fort Mackinac to learn from the costumed interpreters. Just outside of the gate stands Trinity Church, an old Episcopal Church which was built in 1837. A carpenter was at work on the front door and gave me permission to see the inside of the church. I found my way to a simple wooden pew and reverently sat down, soaking in the stillness. On the wall at the front of the sanctuary were these words: "The Lord is in His holy temple." The inspiration for this verse could have originated from either of these passages.

"The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; His eyes see." (Psalm 11:4)

"The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him." (Habakkuk 2:20)

As I sat there in the presence of God, I was keenly aware that God sees me. The God of eternity, the everlasting God, sees me, sitting in a simple wooden pew in Michigan. I am learning not to quickly turn my attention to something else, but to

let God's truth infuse my heart and mind. He sees me. What a blessed thought.

I thought of Hagar, who had been cast out by Sarah and found herself alone in the wilderness. There, the Angel of the Lord found her and spoke with her. Her response was to address God as El Roi, the God who sees or the God of seeing. "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen Him who looks after me.'" (Genesis 16:13)

Prayer

"I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God!
Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground!"
(Psalm 143:5-6, 8, 10)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. “I didn’t simply learn about God; I was enabled to know the living God myself.” What does this statement mean to you? Can you explain the differences between learning about God and learning to know God? Can you identify some ways you have learned ABOUT God and some ways or times you have actually grown in KNOWING God Himself – that is, experiencing God?
2. Knowing God is a “very present help in trouble,”(Psalm 46:1) have you received any divine illuminations during a challenging time in your life?
3. If possible, exchange stories with a friend or study partner so that you may be mutually edified and encouraged! We comprehend the love of God “with all the saints.” (Ephesians 3:18)
4. Think about one person you’ve struggled to like in the past. What about them do you NOT like? Do you agree with Steve’s statement, “It is our own pain that hinders us from loving and connecting with others”? Invitation Point: Prayerfully consider how this person brings out the pain and brokenness in you. Ask God for healing in that area of your life. Ask Him to reveal His Love for you and His Love for that person.
5. Consider these divine illuminations: I Miss You Too, A Stone House, His Father Saw Him and Felt Compassion, and He Sees Me. Which of them strikes a special chord in YOUR spirit? Spend a few minutes thinking about why it draws you. How is God inviting you to know Him in a new way?

CHAPTER 5: EMBRACING THE LOVE OF GOD WITH TRUTH

A little gem of a verse I found during my study is in Jude 21: “Keep yourselves in the love of God.” In addition to the exhortation from Jesus to abide in His love, Jude echoes this same exhortation to the believers he was addressing in the Spirit.

Christian author Elisabeth Elliot had a radio broadcast called “Gateway to Joy” that continues to be heard on Christian stations. She often began her episodes with these verses: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” and “Underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Jeremiah 31:3; Deuteronomy 33:27) It is so encouraging to know that we are loved. I need to hear this wonderful message of good news often. The steadfast love of God for His children never ceases.

Move at your Own Pace

I have long had the habit of reading a portion of Scripture every day. In addition to my daily Bible reading, I began to assemble studies to replace my unbiblical thinking about God’s love and grace. I am more and more convinced of God’s steadfast love. I believe in my mind and in my heart that He genuinely likes His children.

The next few chapters are filled with meaty Scriptures. You may want to read through them at a normal clip as you have been reading, and then go

back and read through more slowly, giving yourself a chance to meditate at your own pace. There is an abundance of rich truth here, but it can be overwhelming to take in at one sitting. This book is the distillation of decades of study. Please give yourself time, and ask God to reveal what He wants you to see. We all are on the same journey but at different places along the trail!

First Thing in the Morning

I have had difficulty believing that God loves me when I awaken in the morning. There is a period when I am moving from half-awake to fully-awake when I struggle in my mind to believe this truth.

Thankfully, I am not alone in this adventure. I found comfort in two Psalms making me think perhaps David had similar feelings. When God seems distant and I am unsure of His love, I pray these verses:

“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”
(Psalm 90:14)

“Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust.” (Psalm 143:8)

I often personalize the words to make them applicable to my condition. In the first verse, instead of the plural pronouns “us,” “we,” and “our,” I change them to “me,” “I,” and “my.”

“Satisfy me in the morning with your steadfast love, that I may rejoice and be glad all my days.”
(Revised Steve version of Psalm 90:14)

Changing the Way I Think

“As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

(Proverbs 23:7 KJV) We each have faulty patterns of thinking which govern our behavior. I think of these as my default settings, like those on a computer.

The first order of business when I purchase a new computer is to change the font, the speed of the cursor, etc. Unlike a computer, my default patterns of thinking have been shaped by my experiences, my childhood, the church I attended, grief and trauma, significant life-shaping events, and mostly by people that have been the closest to me.

While Jesus dwells in my heart through faith and graciously gives me a new heart, my mind also needs to be renewed. This process is described in the passage, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

“Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” (John 8:31–32) When I couple the thought of “to be transformed by the renewal of the mind” with “knowing the truth” to be set free, I conclude that for life-changing transformation to occur, I need to immerse myself in the truth of God’s inspired Word.

Paul says in the letter to the Romans, “Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” (Romans 12:2 NLT) Here are several passages which I read frequently that speak of God’s

love for me. There is a rich feast in these inspired words. Perhaps read one a day and meditate on it, or read a few at a time aloud with your spouse or family.

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations.”
(Deuteronomy 7:9)

“He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” (Psalm 33:5)

“O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help.”
(Psalm 86:5 NLT)

“The Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever.” (Psalm 100:5 NLT)

“How precious to me are Your thoughts, o God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with You.” (Psalm 139:17–18)

“This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in Him.’”
(Lamentations 3:21–24)

“He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me was love.” (Song of Solomon 2:4)

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.”
(Song of Solomon 6:3)

“I am my beloved’s, and His desire is for me.”
(Song of Solomon 7:10)

“The Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing.” (Zephaniah 3:17)

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:20–24)

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”
(John 3:16–17)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

“The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”
(John 16:27)

“I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”
(John 17:26)

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”
(Romans 5:5)

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

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39 NASB)

“God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,

which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:4–10)

“Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us,” (Ephesians 5:2 NASB)

“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:4–7)

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” (1 John 3:1)

“By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us.” (1 John 3:16)

“This is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

“We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1 John 4:16)

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

Hymns

In addition to Scripture, I have found Paul’s advice to the Colossians to be on target: “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,

singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

(Colossians 3:16)

Biblically sound lyrics in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” are a big source of encouragement to me. David says, “Each day the Lord pours His unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing His songs, praying to God who gives me life.”

(Psalm 42:8 NLT)

When I read the Word of God or listen to it on my phone or computer, I am using a few senses: sight, hearing, and mind. When I sing aloud a hymn, I am using my eyes, my ears, my voice, my mind, my emotions, and my spirit. This kind of worship is one of the most complete exercises.

I have been working on memorizing the hymn “Be Thou My vision,” which is an edifying, anointed, and uplifting song. One chilly day, I was singing silently as I walked through my neighborhood, and then remembered how cold it was and that I was the only one outside that morning. I decided to sing this hymn aloud as I walked up the street and found this to be much more meaningful.

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Another spiritual song that has encouraged me and helped me stay rooted in God's love is "Loved with Everlasting Love" by George Wade Robinson. I especially enjoy the first and fourth verses:

Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit, breathing from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so.
Oh, this full and perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.

His forever, only His:
Who the Lord and me shall part?
Ah, with what a rest of bliss
Christ can fill the loving heart.
Heaven and earth may fade and flee,
Firstborn light in gloom decline;
But, while God and I shall be,
I am His, and He is mine.

Prayer

Help us, Spirit of God, to "Keep [ourselves] in the love of God." (Jude 21)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Explain Proverbs 23:7 and Romans 12:2 in your own words.
2. Choose a few verses in this chapter to meditate on, read aloud, or memorize in order to help these truths sink in. Try to personalize them by putting your name or “I, me, my” in the verses as you speak them aloud while your Heavenly Dad listens. Remember, He LIKES you!
3. What do you think the best strategy is for you to “keep yourself in the love of God?”
4. Which psalm, hymn, or spiritual song helps convince you of God’s love?

CHAPTER 6: ACKNOWLEDGING BAGGAGE

When I use the word “baggage,” I am referring to my own “stuff.” It is a lifetime collection of hard experiences, scars, wounds, rejections, and pain. Baggage is universal. Unfortunately, our stuff affects our ability to grasp God’s pure love, and our view of God is distorted. Identifying these kinks and working through them opens the pipeline so more of His grace can reach us.

As I sort through my baggage and wrestle with doubt and unbelief, I know there is nothing wrong with God or any lack of His love. The problem is in my own heart and mind. I think of my own issues and doubts like kinks in a hose. There is an abundance of love and grace flowing from above, but all it takes is a few kinks, and this life-giving stream diminishes to a trickle. Identifying these kinks and working through them opens the pipeline so more of His grace can reach me.

I was not aware of my kinks and issues, or the impact they were having on my family, until my crisis in 2012. I chronicle this year in another book, *Crisis to Christ*. We were transitioning from a one-man show to a family business, and in the process, I learned that my issues were not only affecting how I viewed God and His love, but were also hurting my wife and sons.

One afternoon in a board meeting, I felt like I lost my wife, my sons, my business, and my ministry in half an hour. I left the room sobbing and felt

more pain than I had ever felt before or since. In desperation, I resolved to locate the source of my own pain. I registered for a five-day relationship seminar, engaged a therapist, and began reading and studying books like *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Pete Scazzero.

This process of reflecting and examining my issues from the past was arduous. Those who have engaged in this process know it as “the work.” The center I attended used this phrase for what we hoped to accomplish by engaging in this process: “Facing the Past to Transform the Future.”

I had shied away from this kind of work as unbiblical and unproductive. I reasoned that Paul would not look back, because he wrote: “One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on.” (Philippians 3:13–14)

Yet the fruit of my definition of “pressing on” was an unhealthy view of God and His love, as well as pain and hurt to those who are most dear to me. I believe Jesus endorsed reflection when He taught about the specks and logs in the Sermon on the Mount. When we see specks, we are to first examine our own log.

David similarly asked God to search his heart: “Search me, o God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any [way of pain] in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23–24) I have had a student of Hebrew tell me the phrase we normally translate as “grievous way” can better be rendered “way of pain.” When I

experienced the way of pain, I began to seek God to help me discover the root of that pain.

Knowing I am liked for who I am by One who knows me intimately frees me to be real and to be myself. The more I am convinced of God's love for me, the more I am able to face and reflect on the pain I carry.

My journey to understand the sources of my issues revealed that I have a fear of being abandoned. That day in our board meeting, I felt more alone than I ever had. I was tasting abandonment. It was terrible.

Feeling Abandoned

My father passed away twenty years ago. Several years after this, my mom was telling me about my childhood and how difficult it was for her to raise three boys when my dad was on the road. I learned that for the first five years of my life, he had been a traveling salesman and only home on weekends. He was working to provide for our family, and young men looking for work often ended up with these difficult jobs.

In one of my relationship therapy classes, I connected some dots and discovered this to be one of the reasons I had a fear of being abandoned. I try to imagine what it would have been like to see your dad go away for five days at a time. Children whose parents serve in the military probably have similar issues when they grow up.

As a result of this issue, I felt that I struggled to hold on to the truth that God would not abandon me. Because of my fear of being alone, I cling to these passages that I have committed to memory in order to assure myself that what I experienced does not apply to God. Our heavenly Father will never abandon us and is with us always.

“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever.” (John 14:16)

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”
(Hebrews 13:5)

Well-Intentioned Parents

When I was diligently seeing a therapist, reading, and doing the work of examining my issues, I learned some of the historical roots of my unhealthy thinking. One of the exercises I worked through was called a genogram, where I examined the influence of my parents and grandparents. I was surprised by what I unearthed. I discovered I was a lot like my mom and dad. I also appreciated them in new ways, because I believed they had difficult experiences of their own and did very well considering how they were raised.

I have written pages of what I appreciate about them. They did so much well, and they gave it their best effort. I love my mom and dad and honor them for their efforts to raise my two brothers and I, who were a handful. As I have reflected and worked

through my baggage, I have uncovered interactions with my mom and dad that negatively impacted my understanding of God and the truth.

Loved but Disappointed

I have difficulty believing that God, or my wife and kids, love me unconditionally. I have mentioned how my son with Down Syndrome has helped me taste unconditional love. John loves me for who I am and not based on what I do.

During the summer of 2014, I sensed that God wanted me to get up and meet with Him at 6:00 AM. I had been pretty faithful for quite a season, but one morning I was really tired, and after looking at the clock, I rolled over and went back to sleep for another hour.

When I did get up and was heading for the living room to read my Bible, I sensed God had a look of disappointment on His face. I had seen this look before many times. It generally appeared on the face of my mom, and it was not an encouraging one. I was feeling sad and condemned because I believed I had let God down, when the Holy Spirit gently whispered, “I’m not your mom. I love you all the time.”

Please understand that I do not want to disrespect or belittle my mother, nor am I implying she did not love me, for she did. I want to let you in on the internal “conversation” I had with God that morning which overturned a stronghold in my mind. Even though I knew Mom loved me, I often felt I

could not please her, and at those times I saw this look of disappointment on her face.

God was using this experience to teach me that He is not only loving, but He is love, and He never changes. He loves me regardless of what time I arise in the morning. His commands and instructions are given for my good. I am the one who missed out on an hour of fellowship with my Dad. His affection and care are constant.

Loved but Distant

My dad was a faithful provider, an honorable man, and a kind husband. However, the two of us did not connect emotionally. He was liked by all who knew him, a born salesman, and always available when I needed him. I loved and admired him. He was my dad, but relationally he was distant. It was not easy for me to talk to him.

I have found myself seeing God in a similar fashion and was surprised when, upon reflection, I recognized how much I viewed my heavenly Father through the lens of my earthly father. I saw God as a really nice guy; everyone appreciates Him; He is present in emergencies; He is kind and honorable. Sadly, He doesn't seem to understand me nor connect emotionally with me. I know these impressions are not biblical, but they are a part of who I am, and I have to purposefully replace these untruths with correct thinking based on Scripture.

I am aware that believing God loves me at all times is one of my weak spots, so I am intentional

about reading passages about God's grace, His affection, His unchangeable character, and how He is always for me. The more I am exposed to these powerful truths, the more I am set free from old patterns of thinking and transformed in my mind.

Never Enough

Up until 2012, I knew God could and would forgive my sin because of the death of Jesus on the cross. I simply needed to ask Him and believe Him. My past sins would be erased, I would have a blank slate, and it would be my joy and challenge to seek first and extend the Kingdom. In 1974, when I said, "Okay, God, here we go," I threw myself into doing the work of God. People who know me recognize I have only two speeds: run and sleep.

These words describe my life as a zealous believer: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." This quote is mistakenly attributed to John Wesley. Regardless of who said it, I believe this is a wonderful mindset to have, but only if we are being led by the Spirit.

After almost 40 years of living this way, I sat in our home one day in the spring of 2012 and heard my wife tell me I couldn't do enough to please God. I don't know if I had always been so driven, but that was certainly my life now. I did not grasp the impact of the finished work of Christ on my behalf. I did not recognize that I was already pleasing to God. I now

believe that in Christ, I am not only forgiven, but I am also well-pleasing, for Jesus is well-pleasing, and I am in Him.

I believed that salvation was by grace, but that sanctification was by works. I felt like the more I did for God and the better husband and father I became, the more God would love and smile upon me. Finally, my courageous wife sat down with me and said, "You can't do enough to please God, and you are hurting our family." I was wearing myself thin, and not on unprofitable pursuits. I was spending my energies on my wife, my family, church involvement, the business, and ministry. I was pouring out in every direction and had very little energy left. Our family paid the price of having a fragile husband and father who lived with condemnation for years, believing he did not measure up.

The more grounded I am in God, the more I am able to work through these unpleasant forays into my own baggage. If I don't deal with my stuff, I know eventually it will impact my relationship with those who are closest to me. I think of my stuff as radioactive waste, stored in lead suitcases, and hidden in the corner of my closet. As long as life is smooth sailing, the containers remain safe and sealed. When my buttons are pushed, or when I am tired, stressed, or overworked, then the harmful waste begins to seep out of the container and contaminates the other people in my life. My wife and children have paid the price for pain I had not acknowledged nor confronted.

A word which has been bandied about for years that I did not understand is “boundaries.” I never had them. I poured out in every direction and did not know how to say “no.” I did not have time for Steve; I considered that selfish and unproductive. A true disciple, I reasoned, would be always giving and seeking first the Kingdom of God. In hindsight, I see that this inability to love myself and take time to rest, be still, and develop my relationship with God was harmful to myself and those around me. I don’t know my own heart, but one thing I am learning: my Dad likes me just the way I am. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light and doable. I take naps now. I go for walks. I am trying to develop some hobbies. I am even learning to say “no,” which is still difficult, but I am making progress!

Since I know I am pleasing through Christ, I am able to not continually push myself to do more. I am making a good night’s rest a top priority. I even take naps when I feel the need! With this extra energy, I am more willing to help out with dishes, load and unload the dishwasher, and fold my laundry. A few weeks ago, my wife commented on how attractive she found me while I was sorting and folding my clothes. Wee hoo!

Salvation is always a gift. It is received and never earned. The summer of 2012, I comprehended in a deeper way the good news that I measured up because of what Jesus did for me. I would like to say all was rosy from this point on, but it takes time and intentional study of the truth to undo decades of

faulty thinking. Change may happen quickly in the heart, but lasting transformation and renewal of the mind take time. I am still devoting hours every week to reprogramming unhealthy patterns of thinking and walking in the newness and freedom that Jesus brings.

Prayer

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any [way of pain] in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”
(Psalm 139:23–24)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What is baggage?
2. How was Steve affected by his father being gone during the week until he was five years old?
3. Can you think of any of your own issues which impede your ability to embrace God’s truth? Are you able to trace these issues back to a historical event?
4. Which pieces of Steve’s luggage can you relate to personally?
5. If you are willing, think about your earthly parents. Respectfully but honestly examine which words or actions of your earthly parents have affected how you view your heavenly Dad. How can you go about “letting go of old ways of looking at truth” and “embracing new insights” God is revealing to you?

CHAPTER 7: COMPREHENDING WITH ALL THE SAINTS

“That you [plural], being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ.” (Ephesians 3:17–19) I tend to read the Scriptures in the first person, but this passage is taken from a letter the apostle Paul addressed to the entire church in Ephesus.

I have heard of a new translation of the New Testament that employs the word “y’all” to emphasize the plural of “you.” We need other members of the body of Christ in order to more fully comprehend the love of Christ. We certainly depend on the Spirit and the Word of God, but we also need each other to assimilate the dimensions of God’s care and affection.

I have already spoken of the love my son John has for me and that I have for him. It is the nearest I have come to experiencing unconditional love and grace. His love for me is not tied to any performance or accomplishment on my part. Instead, it stems from the simple truth that I am his dad and he is my son. The way John loves me has had a profound impact on my understanding of the love God has for me as my Father.

The way my parents loved me has also impacted the way I understand God’s love for me. I readily

acknowledge that I was not an easy son to raise, but through thick or thin, they faithfully stood by me. They were always there. I made good decisions and bad decisions, and they never strayed from my corner, supporting me even when they didn't understand or agree with my choices. I could always count on them. Our parent-child bond was strong and constant.

John likes me, but he doesn't always understand or know me as well as my wife knows me. She has much better insight into my character and moods and loves me still. Her love is different than John's because it is more fully informed. After thirty plus years together, we have chosen to continue to love and support each other. We have grown in our appreciation and understanding of each other. After making our way through deep waters in 2011 and 2012, we are now in the best place we have ever been as a couple.

Besides my parents and my wife, I have three incredible sons who also know me. They, too, have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly and have chosen to forgive me and stand by me. Their love is different than John's, because they know me better and have more understanding, and yet still choose to stay with our company, live nearby, and be a regular part of my life. I am crying as I write these words. They are examples of grace and love which "covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) I am a rich man for these relationships alone.

God, in His goodness, has also provided me with a large company of loving friends, each of whom have revealed a new facet of God's love to me. I hope we all have had people in our lives whose faces light up in a smile when they greet us. I can think of several people whose countenances made me know they liked me. In addition to my parents, I think of my grandparents, my Aunt Gloria, Mr. Murray, Dr. MacKenzie, Andy Tonic, and several others. As Clarence said the movie "It's A Wonderful Life," "No man is a failure who has friends." I am not a failure, for I have wonderful friends.

The affection we receive from each other is a foretaste of the great love God has for us. These earthly glimpses help us to grasp the heavenly reality of our Father's love, which never changes.

Special Emissaries of Love

While all abortion breaks my heart, it is exceptionally grievous to me when I hear of a mother choosing to abort a child with Down Syndrome or other disabilities. These precious infants deserve to live, for they are no less created in the image of God than you and I are. We need them. Every part of the body of Christ is necessary for all of us to be properly built up in love. I Peter 4:10 says it like this: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

I have had the privilege of attending Joni and Friends Family Retreats for many summers. These camps are comprised of families affected by

disability. Many people, myself included, believe these weeks are a glimpse of heaven. Love abounds. I could tell you of so many precious people who may not be able to speak, walk, or feed themselves, but they can love. They wonderfully contribute to the body of Christ.

One smile from Laura or Kyle can brighten a whole room. One hug from Mike is worth driving to camp. Upon our arrival at camp, I only have to listen for a loud eruption of joy to discover where Stephen is holding court in his motorized wheelchair.

Stephen is unable to do much verbalizing, but he certainly can make you know when he is thrilled to see you. When our son John saw his counselor from the previous two summers, he ran across the yard and leapt into his arms. I could give even more examples, but I need to ask the rhetorical question, isn't this the way we all should greet each other?

If we want to comprehend and apprehend with all the saints, then we need all the saints! Often, I leave camp wondering, "Who is disabled?" and, "Who is normal?" There are only two commands: love God and love each other. According to this measuring stick, these special people are gifted and wonderfully qualified to teach the rest of us about unconditional love and acceptance.

Stephanie Hubach, the mom of a son with Down Syndrome said, "When the church attempts to function without all of its parts, the body of Christ becomes disabled."

Litmus Test

Not only does having others who love us help us believe God's affection, but we can also gauge our love for God by how we love our neighbor.

The love we give and receive amongst ourselves is a two-way street. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:20-21)

1 John has so much rich truth concerning God's love for us. This short but powerful book also speaks candidly about our love for each other. God's love for us and our love for our brothers go hand in hand. Whether we are tasting of the love of God or discerning our love for God by how we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are comprehending with all the saints the exceptional love of Christ.

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for giving us each other. Thank You for friends, family, and special people, who reveal Your heart of affection for each one of Your children. Thank You for love that covers a multitude of sins. "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you." (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Do you know any “special emissaries of love”? If so, describe them briefly here.
2. How do they express love?
3. How do you imagine God looks at you when you come close to Him in prayer? Is this an accurate depiction of your Heavenly Father?
4. Do you have people in your life who light up when they see you?

CHAPTER 8: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14) Throughout my journey, I have been appreciating in a new way the grace of Jesus and how He died for me when I was a sinner. I have also been comprehending the love of God and how much He likes me for who I am and not based on what I do. The last phrase in this benediction says, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The choice of words in this passage is interesting. Fellowship, or communion, as it is translated in other versions, implies a personal connection. I had heard about the power, conviction, or inspiration of the Spirit. This language suggests that the third person of the Trinity is also a person with whom I can develop a relationship. I can enjoy the fellowship of His presence. As I pondered this concept, my mind was drawn to a few Scriptures that shed more light on the person of the Spirit. They connected with what I had already been learning about grace and love.

The more I come to know the Spirit, the more I love Him and appreciate what He means to me. The more I love the Spirit and am loved by the Spirit, the more I love God and learn of His love. Knowledge of God’s Spirit gives us more insight into God Himself.

Apprehending the Love of God

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”
(Romans 5:5)

The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in understanding the love of God. I knew the Spirit brought conviction and was responsible for bringing me to Jesus, but this verse showed me how He had been at the forefront when I asked God to help me love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. It was the Holy Spirit who poured the love of God into my heart. I had been asking God to move the knowledge of His love from my head to my heart, and He did that through His Spirit.

With Us

“I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may be with you for ever.” (John 14:16 ASV) In my sorrow, the Comforter had been at my side. I was never alone, for He will never leave me. I know this sounds elementary, and it is, but Jesus is not on earth any longer. Jesus, as a human, was limited by time and flesh, and only the men and women who were alive in AD 33 could see Him, learn from Him, and follow Him.

At present, the Son of God is sitting at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us. When Jesus ascended, He ascended into heaven, but the Helper was sent to be with us here. For the millions of us living beyond AD 33, this is wonderful news! Unbound by time, unlimited by culture, race,

location, the Holy Spirit is with us and will never leave us. “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” (John 16:7)

Good Spirit

These past two years, I have been developing a new friendship with the Holy Spirit. My favorite appellation for the third person of the Trinity is found in Nehemiah 9:20: “You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them.” Of all the names for the Spirit, I like Good Spirit, because He is good, kind, solid, and a true friend. He is not bizarre or unpredictable. He is faithful, comforting, near, and misunderstood.

I came to realize that I had many misconceptions of who the Holy Spirit is and how He acts on my behalf. I determined to search the Scriptures diligently and humbly so that He could straighten out my thinking. Since Jesus said it was to my advantage that He would go to heaven and send the Spirit, I wanted to know why. At the same time, I wanted to know the Spirit just as I had been coming to know the grace of Jesus and the love of God. Paul prayed that I would experience the “fellowship of the Spirit,” and I wanted to find the fulfillment of this benediction mentioned in 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Faithful Friend

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24)

The Spirit and I are becoming friends. I am learning to be led by Him and enjoy His presence. One morning, I awoke and needed to change my socks. I was a little groggy, but while sitting on the edge of my bed, I rolled up one sock and tossed it in the direction of the clothes hamper in the corner. It was a good shot and sailed right in without touching the sides. I sensed/heard the Good Spirit say, “Nice shot” in a kind of cheerful tone. I cocked my head to one side and said, “You’re a morning guy, huh?” Then we both smiled. It was a precious time, and I basked in the wonder of this moment for some time.

Then I remembered that God doesn’t sleep or slumber, which affirms He is indeed a morning guy all the time. “He will not let you stumble; the One who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, He who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps.” (Psalm 121:3–4 NLT)

He, the Spirit

The Spirit is a person, not an influence like wind, not a power source like electricity, and not an energy drink. While the Spirit is one with the Father and the Son, He is nonetheless a distinct personage. Notice the pronouns which are used in the following verse. You don’t see “it” but rather “He” and “Him.”

“When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come.” (John 16:13)

The Teacher

“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

While I am ever so grateful for the abundance of godly study tools and resources available to me as I endeavor to know and understand God’s written Word, I lean heavily on the Spirit of God to unfold and explain Scripture to me. The Good Spirit is an excellent tutor and teacher who knows how to convey truth to my mind and heart.

I know the early writers of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, counted on the Spirit to help them recall the words of Jesus when they compiled their sacred writing. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:21)

The Lover

“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit.” (Romans 15:30)

This is a beautiful expression: “the love of the Spirit.” Not only do the Father and the Son love us,

but the Spirit loves us as well. Meditating on this truth expands my understanding and appreciation for the Good, Loving Spirit.

The Helper

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8:26–27)

Many times, when I do not know how to pray, I ask the Spirit to help me and direct my thoughts and words. He has helped me time after time, for He knows the will of God and how to inspire our faith and words. One of the most fulfilling acts I have experienced is praying with a band of like-minded believers and being aware of the Spirit coming upon one after another in powerful, anointed prayer.

The Spirit of God is God

“Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...? You have not lied to man but to God.’” (Acts 5:3–4)

Sometimes I do not know which member of the Trinity to address when praying. In my new relationship with the Spirit, I sometimes say, “Should I be asking You or the Father?” Then I recall that the Spirit is God and realize I have answered my own question.

Jesus depended on the Spirit of God

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18)

“When Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him.” (Matthew 3:16)

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.” (Luke 4:1)

“Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved with whom My soul is well pleased. I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” (Matthew 12:18)

“If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28)

I think it is significant how powerfully Jesus defends the Holy Spirit when the leaders accused Him of having an unclean spirit. I believe He bristled when He spoke these words of warning. “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Matthew 12:31) The unspoken but clearly communicated message I hear

Jesus saying is, "You can say what you want about Me, but if you mess with the Holy Spirit, I will take you out!"

Pointing to Jesus

This year, I am asking the Spirit of truth to reveal Jesus to me as I read through the Old Testament. This is the specialty of the Spirit, for just as Jesus loved and championed the Spirit, the Spirit also loves Jesus and directs our attention to Him.

"When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me."
(John 15:26)

"He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14)

I have been asking the Spirit to reveal Jesus in the Old Testament. The Helper is bearing witness of the person of Jesus throughout Scripture, as, for example, with the Passover lamb and the bread from heaven.

Ask, Seek, Knock

After Jesus had taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11, He then encouraged them to ask, seek, and knock to receive the Spirit. I am not going to begin a discussion on whether we must receive the Spirit or whether all believers already possess the Spirit at salvation; I am simply noting the significance of Jesus' words

“I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:9–13)

Wait

“Behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

“While staying with them He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, ‘you heard from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” (Acts 1:4–5)

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Being still, tarrying, and waiting on God are new skills I am developing. Seeking to be clothed, baptized, and empowered is the first step in being an effective witness for God. Doing comes naturally to me. I am learning to tarry and be quiet in the

presence of God and His Spirit. These times of connection are becoming the high points in my life.

Be Filled

As Paul enjoined followers of Christ in Ephesians 5:18 to “be filled with the Spirit,” may God fill us and reveal more of the person of the Spirit to each thirsty soul.

The primary reason I have included this chapter in the book on the love of the Father is because getting to know the Spirit and having Him “shed abroad” the love of God in my heart (Romans 5:5 ASV) has been essential to my knowing God and the love of God. I commend Him to you. He is a wonderful friend who is always near. God the Father is in heaven, Jesus the Son is at His right hand praying for us, but the Comforter has been sent to be with us forever. The church today has full access to the same Spirit as Jesus, Peter, and Paul. “For He gives the Spirit without measure.” (John 3:34)

Prayer

“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17) Thank you, Jesus, for sending the Spirit to be with us forever.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What is the Holy Spirit's role according to Romans 5:5? Consider looking it up in other translations to receive a fuller sense of the meaning.
2. What is Steve's favorite appellation for the third person of the Trinity? What is your favorite name for the Spirit of God? Why?
3. Steve speaks of the Holy Spirit as a Person, not a thing. Which attributes of the person of the Spirit stood out to you?
4. Think about the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, especially while Jesus lived on earth. Summarize their relationship.
5. Describe your relationship or explain how you have experienced "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" as recorded in the last phrase of 2 Corinthians.

CHAPTER 9: LET GOD LOVE YOU

As I reflect and recount the blessings of the people I have known and loved, I feel guilty even mentioning my own emotional baggage and issues. I have so much going for me, and yet the fact is that I do struggle with believing I am worthy of the affection of others and especially of God Himself. Thankfully, my relationship with God has improved dramatically in the past few years. The change did not occur on His side of the equation but on mine.

God's love and affection for me hasn't changed. He is God. He has not become more loving, for He is love. He can't love me more than He already does. The changes have occurred in my own heart. I'm learning to believe that God likes me, and I am letting God love me. This is an expression that is foreign to many of us. If anyone has a better way of phrasing our part in our relationship with God, I would love to hear it.

Standing at the Door

I first noticed this concept in Scripture when considering the message to the Laodicean Church in the book of Revelation. God is standing at a door knocking and says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20) He is doing His part in reaching out to us, but He is on the other side of a

closed door. It is our responsibility to open the door and invite Him in.

This passage has often been incorrectly applied to God seeking the lost and the unsaved. These words are for believers in the church, not for unbelievers. God is seeking to be nearer to His own people. They are still following Him, but at a distance. Our Dad desires to be close to us. He wants to share our life with us. We each have the opportunity and the responsibility to open the door and let Him in.

I like to think of God's affection for us like a radio signal or satellite transmission. The signal from heaven is strong and consistent – "God so loves the world" – but the static of the world, our own baggage, and the evil one are all conspiring to inhibit our ability to receive this wonderful truth. It is our job to dial in and access the eternal message of love and acceptance from our Dad.

If God is knocking and you hear His voice whispering to your heart, then open the door and invite Him in.

Like a Hen

Are we willing to let God gather us into His arms? In the following passage, Jesus is overlooking Jerusalem, perhaps walking down the road from the Mount of Olives, when He stops and sighs, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a

hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34)

When we are willing, He is willing to gather us in His arms. The ball is in our court. He is like the father of the prodigal son standing at the window looking down the street and longing for a glimpse of his son. He is patiently and persistently knocking and whispering to our hearts, always willing to gather us to Himself. We must turn to Him, open the door, and invite Him in.

Crawl Up Into God's Lap

When my son John, who has Down Syndrome, awakes in the morning, he comes downstairs and finds me. If I am standing, he hugs me, and if I am sitting, he crawls into my lap. His hugs are more like holds, for he clings to me for an extended time. Whether I am standing or sitting, he finds his dad, and we hold each other at the beginning of each day. With this simple act, we are communicating our affection for each other. We have been doing this for many years. It is a wonderful way to affirm our continued care for one another.

In the same way, I need to look for God each morning and let Him hold me and love me and make me know I am His kid. God certainly is our Dad, and His love does not change, but I am learning I need to take some initiative to get close to Him. Relationships are a two-way street.

It is much easier for me to draw near to God knowing that He enjoys my presence. In the past,

when I drew near to God, I felt like the shy schoolboy tentatively moving in His direction, looking down, scuffling my shoes, and afraid to meet His eyes. Then I looked up and saw that He was smiling.

This morning, I was rereading the account of the return of the prodigal son. "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:18-24)

I love this picture of the father who saw his son a long way off, had compassion, ran, embraced, and kissed his son. The son was trying to make his little speech of repentance, and his dad interrupted him, grabbed him, and gave him a bear hug. This is our Dad, too. During the past two years, whenever I have come close to God, I have found that He is always smiling, always loving, and always welcoming.

Waiting and Being Still

A few years ago, I was a part of a small group working through the study materials for *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero. Each of us had daily assignments to fulfill by answering questions and looking up Scripture. I found these easy to do. Before we looked up verses and filled in the blanks, we were also instructed to be still for two minutes. Two minutes is a short period of time, but I found I was unable to do it. Every Tuesday evening when we discussed the questions, I had to humbly report that I had not been silent for two minutes. I fulfilled all the assignments except for being quiet before God.

The next summer, Sandi and I were in the mountains, and I rode my bike a few miles to Lookout Point, overlooking the Delaware Water Gap. I sat on a granite outcropping and, for the first time, sat and drank in the presence of God. I talked a little, then listened, and then simply enjoyed being in His presence. The best word to describe this new experience is “communing.” I think I was there for the better part of an hour before I rode home.

The next day I rode to the same place again. I was a little nervous, because what if God didn’t meet me in such a deep and meaningful way as He had the day before? However, God was faithful, and we had another time of communing and enjoying each other. This became a daily habit each afternoon that week. Sandi even became concerned about how long I was

gone, as the time grew to over an hour and longer. The time flew by for me, because I was with my Dad.

For decades, God had met me when I was in a deep valley and cried out for help. I recalled difficult experiences from my past, and it was encouraging to remember how God faithfully showed up every time. I had an assurance that God would help when I was at the end of my rope. I also knew He would answer my requests to bless the work I was doing, whether preaching, witnessing, or some other worthwhile Christian activity. But deep down, I didn't believe He really enjoyed me or liked me if I was not engaged in seeking first the kingdom.

Why did it take two years after He had been at my side in my kitchen for me to experience this kind of fellowship? I think it is because it took me that long to really believe God liked me. It is not easy to wait on a God you think is simply being kind in a patronizing sort of way. However, when you are assured and convinced in your heart that God truly likes you and enjoys spending time with you, the relationship can move to a deeper level. God is not just there when I need Him; I can enjoy His person and fellowship anytime, even without a reason.

Later that fall, we were back in the area, and I couldn't wait to ride to the Lookout. I put on a jacket and a hat because it was breezy with a significant wind chill. I didn't have the proper gear and, after a short pedal, was tempted to turn around and go back to our warm house. Then I remembered that I was going to meet my Dad. I kept pedaling. I didn't

stay as long as I did in the summer, but God drew near to me as I drew near to Him. God is always outside, patiently waiting for me to open the door and invite Him to spend time with me as I open the door and invite Him in. He is gentle and does not barge in or force His way, but when we seek Him, we do find Him.

Be Still and Know

I continue to invest time reveling in the presence of God and soaking in the truth of God's love. As the truth that God likes me for who I am and not for what I do penetrates deeper into my heart and mind, I am being transformed. Transformation and change take time and intentionality. The more I comprehend the unconditional love of God, the better equipped I am to give this same kind of love to others and fulfill the new commandment. For He says in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you."

"Rooted" and "grounded" are two meaningful words Paul used in his prayer in Ephesians 3:17-19. "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

Rooted and grounded speak to me of soil and planting. In this vein, consider the parable of the sower. "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he

sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As He said these things, He called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 8:5-8)

When His disciples asked Him what this parable meant, He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ Now the parable is this: The seed is the Word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” (Luke 8:8-15)

Notice the two verses which speak to the good soil and bearing fruit. “And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As He said

these things, He called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” (Luke 8:8) “As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” (Luke 8:15)

If you are still reading these words, you obviously are hungry and have “ears to hear.” You are one of those who “hear the Word” and “hold it fast.” Holding the Word is guarding it from being stolen by the devil. As you hold it fast, you are demonstrating you are not shallow, but have depth to endure testing. Those who hear and hold fast nurture the seeds so they are not “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life.” They care about the truth. They guard against losing it and invest time and energy to cultivate the truth until it bears good fruit. Deepening our roots takes time, regular watering, and patience, and then good fruit follows.

It is unfortunate that we in the western world often miss the symbolism in Jesus’ teachings because we are not an agrarian society. In our way of thinking, we expect our hard work to yield better results, but working harder in an orchard or vineyard does not guarantee a greater yield at harvest time. According to John, “abiding in Christ” leads to bearing fruit for Christ. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears

much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”
(John 15:4–5)

This is a simple concept, and yet it conflicts with how many Americans think. We falsely think doing is what matters the most, but in truth, being comes before doing. We need to become human beings instead of human doings. To the degree we are being and abiding, to the same degree we will be doing good and bearing fruit. “Resting in the Lord,” “being still,” and “waiting on God” may be foreign to us, yet they are the biblical model, and therefore, they work.

“They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31) We sing songs about this verse, watch movies with this theme, and often memorize it, but we are crippled when it comes to applying it. We are tired, stressed, and often bear little fruit, and we sadly continue to try harder instead of opening the door and having a quiet cup of tea with Jesus each morning.

We have probably all heard sermons about the sisters Mary and Martha. “Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the

Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38–42)

I have been Martha for much of my Christian life. I am becoming Mary. I can write from both perspectives. When I was like Martha, I was fond of multi-tasking. I always wanted to be busy, rushing through my devotions and everything else so that I could cram more activity into my allotted 24 hours. I rarely said “no” to requests to serve, and I discovered that taking a quick power nap would give me enough energy to keep moving. I enjoyed cafeteria meals in college and seminary because they afforded me the efficiency of a fifteen-minute meal, which, of course, meant I could get back to my to-do list faster. I added people and concerns to my prayer list, but rarely found time to effectively intercede.

As Mary, I’m learning how to go to bed earlier so I can arise early to wait on God and be still. I am becoming better at listening to God instead of rushing through a litany of prayer requests. I am reading more slowly, digesting what I read, journaling, and being open for new insights from God. My schedule is not packed full. I occasionally go for walks and am trying to make time for personal refreshment and reflection. I desire to be a well-watered, peaceful garden. I have not arrived and often find myself slipping back into old patterns of hectic activity, but I have tasted this new life and agree with Jesus, one thing is “necessary,” and it is

the “good portion.” (Luke 10:42) Most of the material in this book is a result of early morning study and reflection.

Let God Enjoy You

Recently on an evening walk, I sensed that God was enjoying our communion. He was happy being together with me. I began smiling, for this was new territory in our relationship. I have trouble conceiving of coming before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and then sitting down just to be together. I thought you came into the King’s presence to report on your activity or to make a petition, but when I consider the goodness of God and the wonder of the gospel and that He loves us and likes us, does it not also follow that He would enjoy us? I am beginning to comprehend more of the glory and uniqueness of our Dad. He is Immanuel, our God who chooses to be “with us.” Ponder these passages:

“The Lord takes pleasure in His people; He adorns the humble with salvation.” (Psalm 149:4)

“For You make him most blessed forever; You make him glad with the joy of Your presence.” (Psalm 21:6)

“O Lord, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells.” (Psalm 26:8)
“One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple.” (Psalms 27:4)

When I think about the account of the prodigal son returning home, I know the joy of the Father is seeing His son who was lost come home again. Then I began thinking about the banquet that evening. As the evening went on, I can see the young son, clothed, eating, and happy to be back. I also see the Dad, sitting near His son, not saying much, just reveling in the presence of His boy. Then occasionally, their eyes would meet, and nothing needed to be said, for they were connected. They were together again.

Make a Start

If this call to open your heart and let God love you resonates with you, may I encourage you to begin small. Aim for one minute reading or listening to the Word and one minute being still and communing with the living God. Give God a chance to talk to you. God is alive. He is near. He is real. He knows how to uniquely communicate to each one of His children because He knows us better than we know ourselves.

“Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near;” (Isaiah 55:6)

“Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice! Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His presence continually!” (1 Chronicles 16:10–11)

Prayer

Thank You for drawing near to us when we draw near to You. Thank You for patiently and faithfully knocking at the door of our innermost being. Thank You for speaking to us and inviting us to share a meal with You. Help us to trust You and open ourselves to Your love and presence.

“May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord show you His favor and give you His peace.”
(Numbers 6:24–26 NLT)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What three examples from Scripture does Steve use when describing God’s love? Name the Scripture reference and answer these questions: who, where, what is being said and/or done, and what is the significance?
2. How do you feel when you draw near to God? Do you see Him smiling? If not, ask the Good Spirit to reveal why and show you more about how God feels toward you.
3. If you have a story about communing with God, share it here in a few sentences or a paragraph.
4. Why did Steve have difficulty waiting on God, enjoying His presence, and communing with Him?
5. Do you enjoy the prospect of being still and letting God love you?

CHAPTER 10: ABIDE IN MY LOVE

“As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love.” (John 15:9)

As much as I marvel at the implications of John 15:9 and the amazing love God has for each of us, I am also hungry to experience the last four words of this passage and “abide in [His] love.”

Abide means to “live in” or “make a place of residence.” It is a translation of the Greek word *meno*, which is the root of the word “remain.” I have had tastes of knowing God loves me, but the tenor of this phrase is not to simply experience the love of God occasionally, but to live in the light of it.

Thankfully, I have had many wonderful times of sensing God’s nearness in worship services, when we were singing and praying. However, a constant state of living in His love, which He commands, has not been my experience. Even now, after God has been faithfully teaching me about His unconditional love and has revealed more about His divine nature, which is love (God is love), I have had to diligently work to hold on to what He has revealed.

As I try to uncover the secret to abiding in God’s love, I wonder: Is it more study? Is it more seeking? As I read the context for this passage in Chapter 15, it is almost like Jesus can read my mind. I am amazed at the straightforward way that He answers my question.

“Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My

Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:9-11)

Like so many of the words of Jesus, they are both simple and direct, yet deep and profound. The answer is simple obedience. He obeyed His Dad, and we are to obey just as He obeyed. As we do, we will experience His joy, and our joy will be full. Wow!

Then my mind wonders which commandments I am to obey. The Ten Commandments? The two commands which are the basis for all the law and the prophets? They tell me to love God with all my heart and to love my neighbor as myself. Let's keep reading and see how He responds to this query.

"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

"This is My command: Love each other." (John 15: 17 NLT)

He has already mentioned this command a few chapters earlier and even named it the "New Commandment."

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you." (John 13:34)

The message I am receiving from John 15:9-12 is: as I love others as Jesus has loved me, I will abide in His love, and my joy will be full.

1 John 4

In the book of 1 John, we see similar passages which integrate our love for God and our love for

our brothers. The whole fourth chapter is worthy of reading slowly and thoughtfully. I have chosen a few verses for our edification.

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1 John 4:10–16)

John 15

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in Me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in Me and My words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are My true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved Me. Remain in My love. When you obey My commandments, you remain in My love, just as I obey My Father’s commandments and remain in His love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with My joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is My commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.” (John 15:5–12 NLT)

Giving and Sowing

Perhaps God is teaching us that if we want to abide in His love, we should give it to others. When we give His love, we will receive more of His love in return.

“Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full – pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.” (Luke 6:38 NLT)

Maybe loving others as Jesus has loved us is Kingdom economics. If we sow love, we will receive love from our investment.

“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6)

Practicing

Obedience is a sign of love and faith. When you love someone and have confidence in them, you express this trust by following their instructions. “Don’t just listen to God’s Word. You must do what

it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.”
(James 1:22 NLT)

For many years, I have asked students what distinguished the foolish man and the wise man. I have rarely encountered followers of Jesus who knew the answer. This is a well-known passage, and we frequently sing it with hand motions. The answer is obvious when we read the passage; the wise man is the one who listens and obeys.

“Anyone who listens to My teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears My teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.” (Matthew 7:24–27 NLT)

“Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” (2 John 9)

Notice how loving others (new command), loving God (great command), and obeying His commands are interlocked. Abiding in God’s love, loving God, loving others, and obeying God’s commands are not only fundamental; they are doable.

“We know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey His commandments.”
(1 John 5:2)

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves His children, too. We know we love God’s children if we love God and obey His commandments. Loving God means keeping His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.” (1 John 5:1-3 NLT)

Prayer

“Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:24) Dear Jesus, help us to love You, obey You, and abide in Your love. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What is the root word for “abide” in Greek? What does this verb mean to you?
2. What are two ways we learn to abide in God’s love?
3. List a some fruits of being in the love of God.
4. How does giving love aid us in receiving love?
5. Describe the role of obedience in loving God and others.

CHAPTER 11: COME INTO HIS PRESENCE

I am assuming that I am writing to blood-bought believers in Jesus. There is no other way to approach God except through the blood of Jesus. The insights I am conveying in this chapter are built on this premise.

“In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
(Ephesians 2:13)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6)

“To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”
(John 1:12–13)

Daily Devotions

Since 1976, I have made a habit of reading Scripture daily, compassing the Bible from Genesis to Revelation once each year. I find my heart is softened as I am exposed to the inspired passages. Anointed words of life are true heart food. My faith has also been increased, for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17). After reading the Word, I set aside time to pray, beginning with my family. I also pray for others. In 2012, I began creating topical Bible studies to help transform my thinking.

After several years and many studies (over 100), the Good Spirit whispered the words to my heart: “spirit and truth.” That phrase comes from the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

“The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23–34)

He affirmed my knowledge of truth, but gently made me know I needed to develop “the spirit,” or my relational connection with God. I began to take regular thirty-minute walks around my neighborhood. I find that when I am sitting in my comfy chair, I am prone to drowsiness and distraction. When I walk, I can focus my attention on communing with God alone. My heart and spirit are encouraged in this precious time with the living God.

I like the word “communing,” for sometimes I talk, and other times I listen. God faithfully meets me as I seek Him. Reading Scripture increases my knowledge “about” God, while communing daily is increasing my knowledge “of” God. As Peter exhorts, “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)

While attending seminary, I had the opportunity to rent a room in the home of Elisabeth Elliot. By interacting with her daily and eating meals, doing chores, and attending church together, I got to know

her as a person, not just as a famous speaker and author. Now, when I read her books or listen to a recorded talk, I receive so much more from what she says, because I recognize her voice and know her heart.

The God revealed in the Bible is my Dad. He is alive. I enjoyed spending time learning about Him in the past, and I am so grateful for opportunities to experience His presence in the present. My reading of the written Word is enhanced by knowing the Living Word.

If you have been reading my monthly newsletters or have heard me speak in the past, you know I have struggled to “wait on God,” because I had difficulty believing His grace and how much He truly cared for me. It is only in the past few years that I have become convinced that God not only loves me, but also likes me. I think if He had whispered “spirit and truth” five years ago, I would not have known how to respond.

Believing that God is beaming when I draw near to Him makes it so much easier to approach Him. I know He genuinely enjoys my company. He is my Dad. He knows me intimately and still affectionately desires hanging out with me. I know this from the source of truth, the holy Scripture, which says “God is for me” (Psalm 56:9) and where I read the words of Jesus, “As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you.” (John 15:9)

David certainly had a wonderful connection with the Almighty. “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is

good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" (Psalm 34:8) His inspired words encourage me to move beyond seeing God from afar to getting close and tasting His goodness.

Seeking God

In the fall of 2018, I was having a "walk with God." My daily practice had been to begin by confessing sins while remembering God's promise of forgiveness: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Then I recite a Scripture about God's nearness to help me believe that God is findable: "Come close to God, and God will come close to you." (James 4:8 NLT)

I especially like the passage that encompasses both of these thoughts: "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Ephesians 2:13)

Come into His Presence

On this particular fall morning, the Spirit of God led me to approach God in a new way through several phrases that are found in Psalm 100. The first was, "Come into His presence with singing!" So, I began to sing (silently) as I walked on the sidewalk. I sang all four verses of "Rejoice, the Lord is King." This was exhilarating. I felt like I was already joining the angels as I began with worship instead of

humble confession and working my way into God's presence. My spirit was already encouraged.

Enter into His Gates with Thanksgiving

The next phrase that was quickened to me was "Enter His gates with thanksgiving." I began to give thanks. I had to work at this a little, for it was a departure from my normal routine of confession, cleansing, seeking, etc. However, once I got with the new program, it was a wonderful time. I spent several minutes giving thanks, and the more I exercised my thank muscles, the more things I thought of for which to be thankful.

At first, I was thankful for the sunshine, my family, and practical items. Then, I began to be thankful for who God is and what He has done for me. I thanked Him for loving and liking me, for cleansing me from sin, for clothing me in the righteousness of Jesus. Once I developed some momentum, my perspective on the day was already being enriched!

Bless His Name

The third portion of the Psalm that was illuminated that morning was, "Bless His name." I took this to mean that I was to praise God for who He is. I had begun by coming into His presence with singing, continued by entering His gates with thanksgiving, and now I had the opportunity and privilege to give Him honor and bless Him for His character and nature. This experience was similar to

what happened when I gave thanks. I had to work hard to ponder and meditate on the nature of God. As I focused on God, my heart and mind got up to speed, and my thoughts turned from a trickle into a stream.

God is Love.

“We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”
(1 John 4:16)

God is Light.

“God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”
(1 John 1:5)

God is Good.

“Taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8)

God is Near.

“He is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In Him we live and move and have our being.’”
(Acts 17:27–28)

Since those first few days of applying these principles, I have thought of many characteristics of God. My practice now is to zero in on one aspect of God’s nature and to chew on who God is for several minutes.

Give Me Ears to Hear

After I have progressed through this edifying sequence, I then ask God to give me ears to hear what His Spirit is saying to me. This expression: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says”

is used seven times in the first few chapters of Revelation.

God's Spirit faithfully communicates with me and leads me. Some days, I am led to pray for others. Other days, I continue to ruminate on the character of God. The one constant is that I sense I am in God's presence and that we are connected and communing.

One afternoon, I was walking on the home stretch and could see our house in the distance. With a hymn playing in my mind and a thankful heart, I began to think about the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28–29. "Jesus said, 'Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'"

I had a deep desire to be "humble and gentle at heart" so my grandchildren would find rest and safety when they were with me. Three foster boys who have entered our world have experienced much trauma. I so wanted them to be at peace and find rest. Desiring to be like Jesus is such lovely fruit, and that desire flows from focusing and meditating on the person of God.

In hindsight, I see that when He led me to seek Him according to the order found in Psalm 100, my attention was pointed to Jesus. I have learned so much about Jesus, not just by reading a passage about Him or by memorizing names for Him (Good Shepherd, Light of the World, etc.), but by taking

time to contemplate and give my full attention for several minutes to thinking about Him.

Ordering Your Way Rightly

After some time practicing this new discipline, I sensed the Spirit saying, “Orders his way rightly.” When I returned home, I looked up this phrase. “The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies Me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (Psalm 50:23) This was a confirmation to me of the value and effectiveness of seeking God this way.

If this approach for coming into His presence as found in Psalm 100 resonates with your heart, a new book, ***Come Into His Presence*** was released in June, 2021. You may find information about it at BuildingFaithFamilies.org.

Prayer

Thank You, Lord, for the eternal principles revealed in Your Word. Teach us how to order our ways so we may come into Your presence and enjoy communing with You. Give us an appetite to know You like David, who declared: “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8) Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Read through Psalm 100 in at least two translations. What stands out to you?
2. What song would you sing if the Spirit encouraged you to come into His presence with singing?
3. Write down five things you are thankful for. Was that difficult?
4. What is your most cherished character quality of God? His goodness? His kindness? Some other quality?
5. What is your favorite name for God? Why?

CHAPTER 12: GREATER IS HE THAT IS IN YOU

“He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4)

The central message from God’s heart to ours is that He loves us. He has always loved us. When we were in a dark, hopeless place, God the Father sent His Son Jesus to reacquaint us with this eternal message. When Jesus bore our sins on the cross, a way was made for us to have our sins removed and be close to God now and for eternity. We call this the Good News.

Not understanding the completeness of the gospel contributed greatly to my crisis in 2012. Now that I understand grace and the good news more fully, and have been rooted and grounded in the knowledge that God knows me, loves me, and likes me, I feel as if I have been born again, again. The knowledge and comprehension of the good news has changed my life, and I believe it will continue to change the world one heart at a time.

Semi-Condensation

When I first embraced the good news as a teenager, God was very near. I could sense His presence, and I never doubted that He loved me. However, over time, a distance had crept undetected into our relationship. God mostly seemed far off, except for those special times in worship services

when I felt His presence. I never articulated it or stopped to think about what I was feeling. I just kept my nose to the grindstone and sought to always be working to seek first and extend the kingdom. Since I knew God loved the world, I reasoned He must love me. However, my unspoken conviction was that He loved me more if I accomplished more for Him. Sadly, as Sandi described it, I felt that I could never do enough to please God. By thinking I could never do enough, I felt I did not measure up. If I let myself entertain these unhealthy thoughts long enough, I would become discouraged and even depressed. I would describe this condition as a form of condemnation, which is radically different than conviction.

Conviction is from God and is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts when we sin. While unpleasant, it is infused with hope, for we know when we confess our sin, He will forgive and restore us. Conviction is both painful and encouraging at the same time. "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." (John 16:7-8)

Condemnation is the debilitating, discouraging, life-crushing work of the "accuser of the brethren," which is from the pit of hell and leads to despair. "The accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our

God.” (Revelation 12:10) When I am experiencing condemnation, I am tempted to lose hope and give up altogether.

In the Gospels, we have an example of two men who exemplify the extreme difference between conviction and condemnation. Peter sinned when he denied Jesus, was convicted, and wept bitterly. Miraculously, he was forgiven, restored, and became a leader in the early church. Judas betrayed Jesus, regretted his actions, wept, tried to give back the money, and confessed his sin. Sadly, he gave in to despair and hung himself.

Peter is an example of godly grief, or conviction. He was convicted of his sin and, with the help of God, found hope and restoration. He sinned grievously three times in one night and later affirmed he loved Jesus three times in one day.

I don’t know what went on in the heart and mind of Judas, but his condition seems to embody someone who is living with condemnation, or a form of worldly grief. 2 Corinthians 7:10 describes both concepts: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”

I have lived in a state of semi-condemnation by not feeling like I could do enough, or be enough, to please God. Understanding the scope of the life and death of Jesus and the subsequent gifts of forgiveness and righteousness has helped me overcome condemnation in a new way. Thank God that “There is therefore now no condemnation for

those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1-2)

Ashamed

I know my sins are forgiven, and I am no longer guilty because of Jesus. I have just explored condemnation, which I think is the Achilles heel of many earnest Christians. Those disciples who are most concerned about living a life which is pleasing to God are the same ones who are the most susceptible to condemnation.

Shame is universal and not restricted to devout believers. Everyone experiences shame. Guilt is the result of something we have done. It is an action outside of ourselves. Even though I sinned, it is about something I did.

Shame is not as much about what I did as about who I am. Shame is an attack on my identity and is much more deadly. Guilt says I did a bad thing; shame says I am a bad person. Guilt stains the hands; shame stains the soul. When I made mistakes as a child, I remember being told I could “wreck a free lunch” or “mess up a one-car funeral.” These words wounded me, because I was being told I was defective. Perhaps that is why I have trouble believing I am loved unconditionally by God or my family.

The fearful component of shame is being seen, known, and exposed. We all dread being fully naked and bare before others. However, God knows us like

no one else; He created us in His image, and with full knowledge, He chooses to love and to like us. When we give place to shame, we have difficulty believing this incredible truth. I am fully persuaded that God loves my wife and children and many other brothers and sisters in Christ. My struggle is to believe that He also loves me. Sadly, I have given credence to the lie that if He really knew me, He wouldn't love me.

Just verbalizing the problem makes me realize how silly and sad this argument is, yet it has crippled me and kept me from living and tasting an abundant life for decades. God not only loves us; He genuinely likes us. He knows each of us intimately. He formed us in our mothers' wombs. The Holy Spirit spoke through David these incredible inspired and eternal words:

“o Lord, You have searched me and known me!
... You formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother's womb.... My frame was not hidden from You, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with You.” (Psalm 139:1, 13, 15-18)

He Was at His Best When I Was at My Worst

Jesus was sent to die for me when I was in the worst possible condition. He knew my sins and my propensity for sin and loved me still. "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Even when He was crucified, He did not change His mind, but loved us to the end, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

This kind of love, which is all-knowing, all-forgiving, and unchanging, is amazing. It is perfect love, and it removes and expels all fear. "Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced His perfect love." (1 John 4:18 NLT)

It is the love of Jesus for me which covers a multitude of sins and leaves me clean, fresh, and forgiven. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) Jesus has loved me completely and perfectly, and His love has covered all my sins.

Whether my problem is with guilt, condemnation, shame, or some other obstacle, I am convinced God has the solution and that it will be found in Jesus and in the truth of God's Word. Peter pens these wonderful words of assurance: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness." (2 Peter 1:3) If some new attack of the deceiver emerges, I will bring it to God, ask Him for the solution, and gain new insight as He opens my

eyes to some new facet of grace I haven't tapped into yet. The Gospel covers any and all obstacles to new life in Jesus the Christ.

Paul says he is not ashamed of the Gospel, for "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16) Hearing the good news of the Gospel and deepening our understanding of it releases the power of God in our lives leading to real change. We all need to continually and regularly hear and comprehend the gospel.

I had the opportunity to hear Dutch Christian and Holocaust survivor, Corrie ten Boom, speak in the 1970s. You may think she would have been teaching about life in a concentration camp or how God enabled her to forgive the German guard who made her life miserable. I was surprised to learn that one of her main themes was the simple gospel of how God forgives our sins. She would say, with her Dutch accent, something like this: "God forgives your sins and casts them into the ocean of His love and then puts up a sign that says, 'No Fishing.'" She was referencing Psalm 103:12: "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us." The evening I heard her speak, she was addressing a predominantly Christian audience. Regardless of how long we have believed in Jesus, followers of Christ need to be reminded of the forgiveness found in Christ.

The Thief

In addition to our individual baggage, we also have an enemy whose whole being is devoted to tearing down and destroying what is true. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Paul says he is not “ignorant of the devices of our enemy.” (2 Corinthians 2:11 ASV) The devil is not a creator, but a liar, robber, and deceiver. Our battle is a spiritual one. “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5)

As we set ourselves to hold on to truth, we are confronting strongholds, lies, misinformation, and unscriptural teaching. We are engaged in a life and death struggle for the truth that Jesus came to give us. He came to set us free from untruth, unbelief, sin, and our accuser satan.

Spiritual Warfare

When I don't know how to pray as I ought, I ask the Spirit for divine assistance. “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind

of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God." (Romans 8:26–27 NIV) This multi-faceted member of the Trinity knows how to fight. "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12:28) Jesus was helped to war in the Spirit.

I assume most believers have had some teaching on spiritual warfare from Ephesians. Paul exhorts us to put on the whole armor of God. Many years ago, I used to consciously put on each of these divine armaments by faith each morning. I would visualize a point on each piece and trust God to help me be strong in the Lord and in His armor.

"Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is

the Word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit.”
(Ephesians 6:10–18)

The Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God

This book is rooted in inspired Scripture. Since we can expect to be attacked by our enemy, we need to know the truth. Just as Jesus confronted lies with the sword of the Spirit, so must we. The truth transforms us, sets us free from untruths, and is a weapon to counteract the lies from the liar and deceiver.

Three times in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is tempted. Three times, He responds with the sword of the Spirit: “It is written.” When we are tempted to doubt the truth, feel discouraged, or struggle to believe the good news, affirming the truth of Scripture is a powerful antidote to attacks from the devil.

I don’t always need to be clever when engaging in spiritual warfare; I simply need to put up a fight. When combatting lies and doubts which do not seem to give way, I pray, “In Jesus’ name, I resist the devil.” I can do this aloud or silently. I am not a fan of talking to the devil directly. Instead, I hide behind my big brother Jesus and pray in His name.

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.” (James 4:7–8)

Thanks Be to God

The more I embrace the truth of God's love, the better equipped I am to love God and my family. It is no wonder the devil is seeking to destroy my relationship with God and an accurate apprehension of His grace.

"Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:57)

Prayer

Thank You for "the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16)
May we "have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:18-19)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Think about your Christian life. Are there one or more things you think you HAVE to do for God to accept and like you? Dig deep. There might be more of this under the surface than you realize.
2. Describe the difference between conviction and condemnation. Which do you feel more often? Why?
3. What is the difference between guilt and shame? How does Satan use lies to crush and cripple people under feelings of shame? If you struggle with feelings of shame, meditate and ponder the truths of Psalm 139.
4. How do we engage in spiritual warfare with the devil?
5. When you are tempted to doubt that you are an adopted child of God, which verse or verses can you recite to combat that lie?

CHAPTER 13: GOD IS TREATING YOU AS SONS

When I began asking God to help me love Him in 2011, I had no idea how He would sovereignly answer this request. On the one hand, I have documented wonderful revelations I was given by the Spirit of God and through the Word of God. On the other hand, I went through the deepest valley I have ever known and experienced pain and crisis to a degree I would not wish on anyone. This is documented in another book entitled *Crisis to Christ*.

However, without what I call both the blessing and the chastening, I would not be where I am today or be who I am. I am now able to truly give thanks in all that transpired, for God is Lord of all, and He has divinely orchestrated the whole symphony.

While this is the shortest chapter in this book, it needs to be here because it provides insight into the way God loves His children. God is our Dad; we have established that fact. We are adopted children of God, and His Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are His kids. We are loved with an everlasting love. He cannot stop loving us, because love is who He is. God is love. These truths are at the core and foundation of our relationship.

Even Jesus was chastened by His Father. “In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard

because of His reverence. Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him,” (Hebrews 5:7–9) Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered.

As children of God, we can also expect to be disciplined, chastised, and trained. When life is hard, it does not mean God is displeased with us. Perhaps it is simply training and discipline. I am learning to see chastening as another way God reveals His love.

I will let the Scriptures speak for themselves in two renderings of the same passage in Hebrews 12:4–11. The first is from the English Standard version (ESV) and the second from The Message by Eugene H. Peterson.

ESV

“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.’

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be

subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

The Message

“In this all-out match against sin, others have suffered far worse than you, to say nothing of what Jesus went through—all that bloodshed! So don’t feel sorry for yourselves. Or have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as His children?

My dear child, don’t shrug off God’s discipline, but don’t be crushed by it either. It’s the child He loves that He disciplines; the child He embraces, He also corrects.

God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God’s training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God’s holy best. At the time, discipline isn’t much fun. It always feels like it’s going against

the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God."

Our Dad doesn't have any Baggage

Our Divine Dad is a perfect parent. As a dad, I have often disciplined out of anger or being upset. I was an imperfect dad who regularly had to ask for forgiveness from my children for mistakes in judgment or discipline. God knows everything. He is fully informed, completely loving, totally just, and incredibly merciful. He chastens us, not as a result of His issues, but for our good. He is also with us as we are being chastened. "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (Isaiah 63:9)

We have a sugar-coated, unbiblical view of love if we think God simply gives us lollipops all day to show His care for us. God is all-wise, all-knowing, and all-loving. When He disciplines us, it is for our good. Mediate on this verse before quickly reading on. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." (Revelation 3:19)

Here are a few more verses affirming the love of God for those experiencing His loving discipline.

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your Word." (Psalm 119:67)

"It is good for me that I was afflicted; that I may learn Your statutes." (Psalm 119:71)

“Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.” (Deuteronomy 8:5)

Pruned

In 2012, my friends would call to check in on me and see how I was faring. I sometimes replied that I felt pruned. I have done some pruning in my own backyard, and if I were a tree, I would not like the feeling of having a branch lopped off. Often, these well-meaning brothers and sisters in Christ would try to encourage me by telling me how this difficult season of life would eventually bear good fruit. I could not imagine that happening at the time. I just wanted to have life return to how it was before and to be free of pain and suffering. However, they were correct. The ministry God gave me has deepened and produced better fruit than if I had not been pruned. If you are being pruned, take fresh courage.

“Every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” (John 15:2)

Blessings?

A song that has ministered to me along this line is “Blessings” by Laura Story, who “thought she had her life and everything in it under control...until she and her husband, Martin, had to face a brain tumor, infertility, and a son’s birth defect head on.” laurastorymusic.com/bio/

These lyrics take on new meaning when we understand her story. Here is the first verse:

We pray for blessings, we pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering
All the while, You hear each spoken need
Yet love is way too much to give us lesser things

'Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights
Are what it takes to know You're near
What if trials of this life
Are Your mercies in disguise

Prayer

“We have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.” (Colossians 1:9–10 NLT)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Steve shares that on the other side of the deepest valley he has ever known, he is able to give thanks in all things regarding that experience, because “God is Lord of all, and He has divinely orchestrated the whole symphony.” Think about the valleys you’ve traveled in your journey. Is there one to which you can look back with thanksgiving, knowing God did a good work in you?
2. What word or phrase drew your attention as you read Hebrews 12:4–11 in the ESV and The Message?
3. Have you ever felt pruned?
4. Can you connect with the image of God as Father? Do you believe He disciplines us in love and for our good?
5. How does the message in the song “Blessings” impact you?

CHAPTER 14: WHY KNOWING GOD'S LOVE IS VITAL

You may have heard it said that you cannot give what you do not have. In the same way, I hope it is evident that we are unable to love until we have first been loved. This is an eternal verity that is plainly taught in Scripture. Love begets love. The following three verses are all found in 1 John 4, but I have taken the liberty of reordering them:

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

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

“We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”
(1 John 4:16)

God always makes the first move, and His strategy works. John the Apostle knew he was loved. His name even means “beloved.” His letter was written to a church whose members were convinced that God was for them.

This chapter is about the fruit of believing that you are loved and liked by God. What does it look like to know this truth deep in our souls, and how, practically speaking, would our lives change if we completely and stubbornly believed it

Four Wonderful Fruits

- I. When we know we are loved by God, we are able to love God, which is what we were created and privileged to do. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” (Matthew 22:37–38)
- II. When we are rooted in God’s love, we are empowered to practice the new commandment. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you.” (John 13:34)
- III. When husbands know they are loved, they can fulfill the call of God to “love [their] wives, as Christ loved the church.” (Ephesians 5:25)
- IV. When fathers and mothers know they are unconditionally loved, they are equipped to love their children unconditionally as they “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4)

Any one of these fruits is worth the effort to pursue God until He makes you know you are loved and liked. I first embarked on this journey because of the deficiencies in my own relationship with God. I can now say that my Heavenly Dad and I are tight in a way I did not dare to hope for or believe. I love God more than I ever have. I have found out He genuinely likes me. I believe I am created with an eternal longing in my heart for God alone. Nothing else will satisfy the deep desire of my heart to be fully

known and fully loved by God. I was made by Him and for Him when He “put eternity” into my heart. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

I used to be motivated by fear – fear of not being accepted, fear of not belonging, fear of not measuring up. I was motivated to earn love, to prove myself worthy of love. Now I am motivated because I am loved. I am not driven by fear, and I am experiencing the truth of 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” I can also identify with the Apostle Paul, who was motivated and controlled by love and not by doubt and anxiety. “For the love of Christ controls us.” (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Knowing I am an adopted child of God has drastically changed my relationship with the people who are nearest and dearest to my heart, my wife and sons. It was the fear of losing them which drove me to get the help I needed. Not only are these precious people still close to me, but our love for each other has also grown and deepened. Having my identity in Christ alone, and not in my work or in how good a husband or dad I was, has freed me up to be more real, authentic, and transparent.

This next statement may seem a little strange, but keep reading, please. I no longer need my children to like me or depend on me. For most of my life, I needed to be needed. I wanted to be liked. Now I am seeking to live vertically, looking to God alone to be my compass and motivation. As I am aware of being liked by God, I am freer to be

who God designed me to be. God is helping me to be more fully present and open. I am able to value and articulate my emotions instead of dismissing them. When looking to God alone for acceptance and identity, I don't depend in an unhealthy way on my wife or our children for my own emotional needs to be met. God likes me for who I am and not for what I do. This is a simple sentence, but far reaching in its implications.

I am a much better communicator. I can hear and receive information without reacting as emotionally as I have in the past or taking what is said to me as personally as I once did. I am not perfect, but I have made big strides. For most of my life, it was extremely difficult to respond thoughtfully because I was taking all input personally. Now, I am finding I have a greater freedom to hear and speak the truth in love. In the past, I was simply not rooted and grounded in the love of God and took what was said as a threat to my identity. It appeared that I was overly sensitive or prickly, but the root problem was not grasping grace.

When I am investing in my connection with heaven, dealing with my own pain, and establishing godly boundaries, my home is a safer place. I am nicer to be around. Our family has better conversations. We can even hold differing opinions and still love each other. All my sons are free to join different churches and hold to a variety of theologies and still be accepted at our dinner table. When I was not as rooted in the love of God as I am now, life

was more black and white. I had strong convictions of what was biblical, what music was helpful, and what churches were acceptable. It is not wrong to have strong convictions, but it is wrong to impose them “ex cathedra,” authoritatively, on your family. When I did not have a healthy sense of my identity in Christ, I was unable to entertain opposition or have a reasonable conversation with those who disagreed with my positions. Agreeing with Paul in Romans 14, I believe we should all have convictions, but should also treat each other with respect and give grace to one another. These are new skills I am learning. “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Romans 14:5) “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” (Romans 14:13)

These next few fruits may sound silly. I do not get as angry with inanimate objects as in the past. I can recall many times when I would bump my head on a low doorway, or hit my thumb with a hammer, or stumble into a wall. Sad to say, I have cursed doorways, thrown hammers, and hit walls as if they were conspiring to make my life miserable. I later had to repair the wall, and the hammer may still be in the gutter of our previous home. I am not proud to write this, but when you work hard and don't allow some time to rest, to be refreshed, and to build up an energy reserve, even hammers and walls

can push your buttons. This has almost ceased. This is the good fruit of devoting time for resting in the Lord and in His Word.

The more I am rooted in Christ, the greater capacity I have to walk in the moccasins of others. When I am anxious about my own standing with God or not secure in who I am as an adopted child of God, I use up my energies working on pleasing Him rather than thinking of others. Now I am finding new abilities to listen to others, see life from their perspective, consider how my words might impact them, and develop strategies to build them up. This kind of awareness had not been on my front burner for a long time.

I have always wanted to be a mentor and father to my sons. I wish I could have a “do-over” in that department. I devoted so much energy just to keeping my own nose clean and working on following Christ myself that I was not as available to help my sons as I wish I had been. I did what I could and gave the best I had, but I see now how different I would have been as a dad if I had the relationship with God then that I have now. I actually have something to offer now. Taking better care of myself has also enabled me to have more energy and more time for what is really important. I think back to making a tent with my boys and then falling asleep inside of it because I was always burning the candle at both ends. But God knows, and He is a Redeemer. I can still be a Dad to my sons and their kiddos.

Maybe this is why grandpas are so nice! “Too soon old and too late smart,” as the Amish say.

Knowing that God is for me has added a whole new dimension to my personal times with God. Without obsessively working to be accepted and pleasing, I am learning to enjoy God. “Knowing God” is a precious fruit of “knowing God’s love.” God is so much more than a need–supplier or a sin–forgiver or a burden–bearer. He is good, really good. He is kind. He is patient. He is creative. He has a sense of humor. We enjoy being in each other’s presence. I am finally getting to know my Dad for who He is and not only for what He can do for me.

Prayer

Father, fulfill this Scripture in my heart and in my family: “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. What can “reset our motivation engine”?
2. Is there any person you depend on for your identity? What relationships or what job titles or functions is your identity based on?
3. Are you looking to someone or something to meet your emotional needs that only God can satisfy?
4. Which fruit that Steve experienced as he walked and lived in God’s love would you like to experience more fully?
5. List as many fruits of “Knowing God’s Love” as you can from this chapter. After you are finished, go back and select the one you would like to experience more fully.

CHAPTER 15: LOVED TO LOVE TO KNOW

When my quest to love God began, I desired a relationship with God based on love and not duty. I wanted to love God and be loved by Him. As my journey has progressed, I have found loving God is not the end of my pilgrimage but one more step towards knowing God. Just as He loves us for who we are and not for what we have or have not done, so I am finding myself loving God because of who He is. His character, His nature, and His attributes are worth knowing, loving, and admiring.

The more I know God, the more I love and appreciate Him. The more I love Him, the greater my desire to know Him. St. Augustine of Hippo expresses this sentiment so eloquently when he writes, “To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement.”

The Love of Christ Controls Us

Paul zealously pursued the establishment of the church. He passionately fought for the truth and endured unbelievable hardships for the brethren, but his love for God was his primary motivation. “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” (Philippians 1:23–24) His desire was not only to see the body of Christ established, but to

know Christ. “For the love of Christ controls us.”

(2 Corinthians 5:14)

In Philippians 3, Paul bares his soul and reveals his all-consuming ambition. “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know Him.” (Philippians 3:7–10)

Just as Paul was instrumental in establishing the church, Moses was the chosen instrument of God to form the nation of Israel. At one juncture, Moses offered to have his own name blotted out of the book of life in exchange for the redemption of Israel. He loved his people, but what ultimately motivated Moses was his love for God and his desire to know Him.

“Now therefore, if I have found favor in Your sight, please show me now Your ways, that I may know You.” (Exodus 33:13) Moses sought to see and understand God’s ways so he might learn more about God’s person. Paul, Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Samuel, and David shared one common purpose, a desire to know God. These chosen few were wonderfully anointed to do the work of God, but the

shared desire of their innermost being was their love for God.

“Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.’” (Jeremiah 9:23)

Hosea proclaims, “Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; His going out is sure as the dawn; He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” (Hosea 6:3)

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

I have a dream. I am looking forward to the day when followers of Jesus gather to talk about and ponder the attributes of God and what they have learned about Him and His character. These earnest meetings would be comprised of kindred spirits who share insights they have received from Scripture as they have pressed on to know the Lord. They would tell of experiences they had when the presence of God was especially near. This would be true fellowship indeed.

This day is coming. According to Jeremiah 31, referenced in Hebrews 8:11–12, “They shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all

know Me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

May God turn us heavenward and give us hearts to know Him. “I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the Lord; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart.” (Jeremiah 24:7 NASB)

I hope, as we seek to love God, we will find our hearts satisfied with a new understanding and comprehension of His grace and His person. I hope our new experiences with God will improve our ability to love our spouses and family members as we have been loved. It is my prayer that the good Spirit of God will enable and inspire each of us to “press on to know the Lord.” (Hosea 6:3)

Prayer

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

1. Listen to your prayers. Are you more often thankful for what God does or for who He is?
2. What motivated Paul and Moses?
3. According to Jeremiah 9:23–24, in what does God delight?
4. What is Steve's dream for followers of Jesus?
5. Do you believe it is God's will for you to know in your heart of hearts that He loves and likes you for who you are? Then ask Him to write these truths on your heart, based on my favorite Scripture about prayer: "This is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him." (1 John 5:14–15)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Demme and his wife, Sandra, have been married since 1979. They have been blessed with four sons, three lovely daughters-in-law, and two special grandchildren.

Steve has served in full- or part-time pastoral ministry for many years after graduating from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is the creator of Math-U-See and the founder of Building Faith Families.

He produces a monthly newsletter and weekly podcasts. You can follow him on Facebook at [facebook.com/stevedemme/](https://www.facebook.com/stevedemme/)

Steve is a regular speaker at home education conferences, men's ministry events, and family retreats.

BUILDING FAITH FAMILIES

Exists to teach and encourage families to embrace the biblical model for the Christian home. Scripture declares God created the sacred institution of the family. In His wisdom, He designed marriage to be between one man and one woman. We believe healthy, God-fearing families are the basic building block for the church and society.

The family is foundational and transformational. Parents and children become more like Jesus as they lay their lives down for each other, pray for each other, and learn to love each other as God has loved them.

RESOURCES TO ENCOURAGE AND STRENGTHEN YOUR FAMILY

The Monthly Newsletter

- This includes an encouraging exhortation as well as updates on Bible contests and upcoming speaking engagements.

Podcast

- Each week, a new episode is released on our website, iTunes, and our Facebook page. These may be downloaded for free.

Seminars for free download

- For over 30 years, Steve has been speaking and teaching at conferences around the world. Many of his messages are available for your edification.

BUILDINGFAITHFAMILIES.ORG

KNOWING GOD'S LOVE,

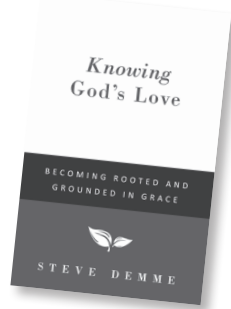
WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

Comprehending God's unconditional love is the cornerstone for the overarching commands to love God and our neighbor. For we are unable to love until we have first been loved. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) and "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us." (1 John 4:10)

The first, or as Jesus called it, the Great Command, is to love God. I began asking God to help me love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and was wonderfully surprised by how He answered my request.

Instead of awaking one morning with a burning love for God, which I expected, He began to steadily reveal how much He loved me. In 2012, I found myself believing in a new way that God knows me thoroughly and loves me completely. This knowledge that God likes me for who I am, and not based on what I do, has transformed my life.

As I have become more rooted and grounded in grace, my relationship with God is now much richer and deeper. My wife and I are closer than we have ever been. Knowing I am loved and accepted just as I am has freed me to be more transparent and real as I relate with my sons and others.



LOVED TO LOVE

LOVING OTHERS AS JESUS HAS LOVED US

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, He responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” (Matthew 22:37-38)

As He was about to be crucified, Jesus washed His disciples’ feet and introduced a new revolutionary teaching: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you.” (John 13:34)

Jesus was able to love well, for He was well-loved. At His baptism, the heavens opened, and God the Father spoke, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” (Matthew 3:17 NLT)

The more you and I comprehend and assimilate the love of God by His Spirit, the greater our capacity to love God and others, for perfect love flows from God. “We love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

As a husband and father, my primary responsibilities are to love God, my wife, and my children. I am writing as a man and sharing how God has led me to begin applying these principles in our home. But these principles are applicable to every believer.

The fruit of loving others as we have been loved will not only bless each of our homes, but our communities as well. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35).



SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

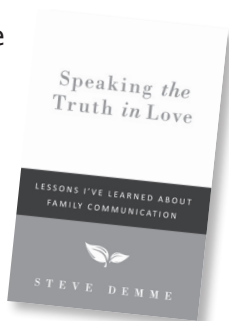
LESSONS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Most of what I've learned about communication, I acquired in the past few years during transitioning my business to a family owned business. The ability to communicate about difficult topics like business, values, your occupation, and a family's legacy takes effort and training.

As a husband and father, I have the potential to build up and encourage my family like no one else. I also have the ability to tear down and discourage my wife and sons. The Bible teaches effective principles of communication which are timeless.

My relationship with my wife and children has been transformed through godly safe communication. As I continue to grow in grace and the knowledge of God, I am in a better place to have open, transparent, and honest communication. While the skills we have acquired in being a clear speaker and an engaged listener are beneficial, investing time to have a quiet heart is essential. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

I hope the principles we have learned and applied to such benefit in our own home and business will be a help to you on your journey. May the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. (from Psalm 19:14)

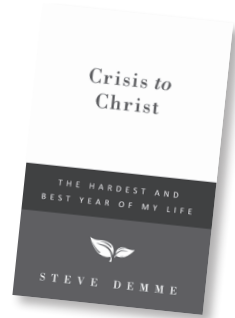


CRISIS TO CHRIST

THE HARDEST AND BEST YEAR OF MY LIFE

I have wounds, scars, baggage, and stuff from my past, which I have tried to ignore, but which is always present. In 2012, I was confronted with the distressing knowledge that my own wounds, which I thought were hidden and of no consequence, were wounding my wife and sons. I discovered I cannot hide my toxic issues, for eventually they will leak out and hurt those who are closest to me.

This difficult time, the hardest and best year of my life, was instrumental in changing my life and transforming my relationship with God and my family. On this journey, I experienced pain, which led me to acknowledge my own hurts and get help from the body of Christ to understand root causes of my distress and confront unbiblical thinking.



While I experienced incredible pain, I also discovered that my Heavenly Dad likes me just the way I am. Even though my path went through deep waters, God was with me every step of the way.

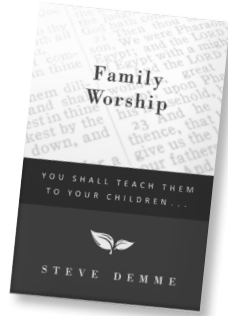
My motivation in writing is to affirm others who are going through similar valleys and tribulations. These hard journeys are normal for the Christian. Every person of note in Scripture endured at least one lifechanging crisis. God uses these difficult times to work deep in our hearts, reveal more of Himself, and transform us into the image of His Son.

FAMILY WORSHIP

YOU SHALL TEACH THEM TO YOUR CHILDREN

In this readable and encouraging book, Steve shares the ingredients for a doable plan of family worship. After many years of trying and failing, God helped the Demmes make studying God's Word a daily part of their home.

Steve also addresses obstacles which we all face in establishing the discipline of reading God's Word as a family. Be encouraged by Steve's experiences teaching his four sons, and learn from other families who share strategies that have worked for their children. All families are unique and special. May each home find their own style which works best for them.



"It was helpful to see the comments at the end from other families saying what they had done. I know in my heart that God does much more than we can imagine when we even take the smallest steps to disciple our children, but it was good to have some practical examples from you and others. Even just the reading of Scripture allows God's words to take root and his Holy Spirit to minister to us all."

"I loved the book and read it in about a week and a half. My chief take-away was family worship needs to be an important part of family life. Your book had some great examples of how to make it more appealing to the kids."

"My husband had never realized that he needed to give his family his best. He had never considered that we have to love God before we can teach our children His commandments."

HYMNS FOR FAMILY WORSHIP

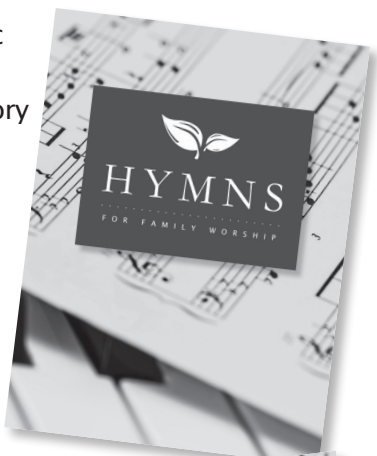
This time-honored collection of 100 classic hymns will be a rich addition to your family worship. Make a joyful noise to the LORD!

In addition to the music for these carefully selected songs of worship, the history and origin of each hymn enhances the meaning of the lyrics.

There are four CDs with piano accompaniment for singing along in your home, car, or church.

Some of the titles are:

- What a Friend We Have in Jesus
- Holy, Holy, Holy
- It Is Well with My Soul
- To God Be the Glory
- All Hail the Power of Jesus Name
- Amazing Grace
- How Firm a Foundation
- Blessed Assurance
- Christ Arose
- Rise Up, O Men of God
- Jesus Paid It All
- Just As I Am, along with 88 more!



COME INTO HIS PRESENCE

TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD

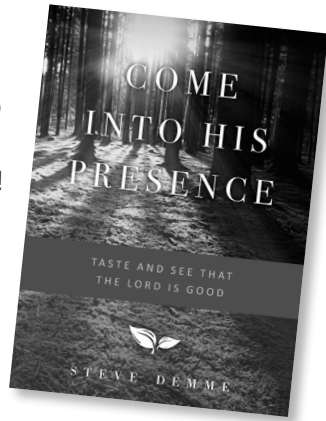
God invites each of us to come into His presence. His “Father heart” has ever yearned to be near His people. This book is about how the good Holy Spirit led Steve to apply the eternal principles found in Psalm 100 and draw near to God through Jesus.

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into His presence with singing! Know that the LORD, He is God! It is He Who made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise! Give thanks to Him; bless His name! For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations.

By applying these inspired Scriptures, Steve has discovered what David meant when he declared, “Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8 NLT)

Because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, God and His people are being restored to a close relationship with their Heavenly Father. “Look, God’s home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them.” (Revelation 21:3 NLT)



STEWARDSHIP

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Luke 12:34)

Stewardship is personal finance taught from a biblical perspective, written by the author of the successful Math-U-See curriculum, Steve Demme. With his signature humility, humor, and sharp math skills, Steve combines practical math instruction with biblical principles of finance and discipleship material.

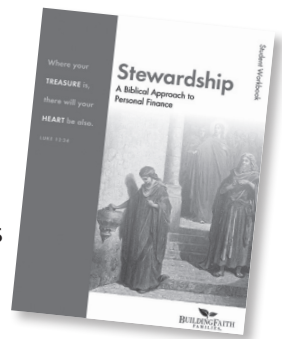
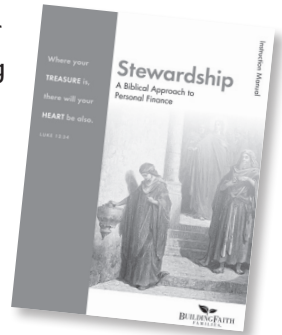
This program is appropriate for anyone with a good understanding of math and beginning algebra. Many parents have commented they wish they had this class when they were a young adult.

The second edition is updated with current topics relevant to young people aged 15–17, who are beginning to explore more independent financial opportunities and responsibilities. Here is a sampling of the thirty-six topics

Consumer Math Topics

- Banking & Checking
- Budgeting & Credit Cards
- Cost of Owning a Vehicle
- Understanding Mortgages
- Insurance and Bearing Burdens
- Cost of Post Secondary Education
- Entrepreneur
- Christian Micro-Finance
- Compound Interest and Investing

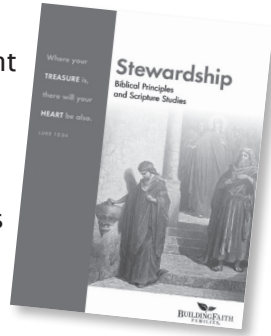
Once the heart is connected to our treasure, it is essential to nurture our heart from God’s inspired



Word. In each of the thirty-six lessons, there is devotional material called Biblical Principles and Scripture Studies. These focus on Biblical principles of finance as well as Scripture studies on basic discipleship. Here is a sampling

Biblical Principles to Govern Our Treasure.

- The Love of Money
- Trusting God and Being Content
- Honor the Lord with Your Wealth
- Giving from a Redeemed Heart
- The Poor, Widows and Orphans
- The Blessing of God
- Scripture Studies to Instruct Our Heart
- Loving God and Belonging to God
- Conviction Versus Condemnation
- The First Commandment with a Promise
- David, a Man After God's Heart
- The Ministry and Work of the Spirit
- Jesus, the Suffering Servant Our Identity in Jesus



The Student Workbook has thirty-six lessons which are organized into a weekly format, with five worksheets per lesson. There are ten questions per lesson. Seven problems are from consumer math topics, two are from the Biblical Principles and Scripture Studies, and one is written to facilitate family discussion.