

BECAUSE HE LOVES ME



How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life

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Because He Loves Me: How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life

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FOREWORD

I have been a born-again Christian for many years now, and God in his kindness has placed me and my family in a Bible believing church where the gospel occupies front and center stage. In the worship music, in the preaching, in home fellowship, in counseling, and in God's people, the Lord Jesus and his work on the cross hold the key position and authority. Yet even with this blessed background and training, I have hit many stumbling blocks of faith. I have had doubts about God's goodness, doubts about God's love, and doubts about overcoming the stubborn, numerous sins that mar my heart, my character, my relationships, and my witness. Yet, through it all, God by a miracle of his grace continues to reveal himself and draw me deeper and closer to him.

One means the Lord used specifically to reveal himself to me was the material Elyse presents here in *Because He Loves Me*. I first heard it in a one-day ladies seminar that preceded a biblical counseling conference. During the conference she presented it again in an abbreviated format tailored for counselors. She demonstrated how the gospel message, in five parts—the incarnation, Jesus' sinless life, his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—could be applied practically to a variety of counseling settings such as an anorexic teen and a Christian husband addicted to pornography. It was at this point that the Lord flipped the floodlight of revelation on my heart, and I saw with undisputed clarity that the gospel message is in fact the answer to every problem situation and sin. I, of course, knew this in my head for many years, but God made it an absolute reality in my heart at that minute.

In my mind's eye came the last scene of the movie *The Miracle Worker*, the old version with Patty Duke as little Helen Keller and

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Anne Bancroft as Annie Sullivan, the teacher. Throughout the movie, Annie Sullivan has been doggedly persistent in her attempt to teach the blind and deaf Helen sign language. Helen has been alternately angered, depressed, and finally resigned until one moment at the end of the movie, when Ms. Sullivan is signing out the word w-a-t-e-r yet again, the light of understanding goes on in little Helen. There is great drama and emotion as Helen rushes from object to object finally understanding what her patient, loving teacher has been trying to make her understand.

In a similar way to Helen Keller in that last scene, the Lord illuminated my heart to the power of the gospel through Elyse's message that day. Like little Helen, finally understanding, the answer to every question, problem, and sin—the g-o-s-p-e-l, the g-o-s-p-e-l, the g-o-s-p-e-l. Now when I hear it in the worship, my mind signs the g-o-s-p-e-l. When I hear it in the preaching, I see the g-o-s-p-e-l. When I see it in the love of my husband, my children, my friends, I see the g-o-s-p-e-l.

Because God loves us, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3) It is simply and powerfully the g-o-s-p-e-l, a true miracle given by an amazing Savior, Brother, Priest, and King.

Jody Hogan

THE “MUST-READ”

INTRODUCTION:

ARE YOU FORGETTING SOMETHING?

Have you ever had that uncomfortable feeling that you’ve forgotten something important but just can’t remember what it is? I had that experience a few weeks ago as my husband and I were leaving church on Sunday morning. I had a niggling sense that I was forgetting something but I just couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Purse? Nope. Bible? Got it. Then, as we proceeded down the main street toward the freeway, suddenly I started yelling, “The boys, the boys, we’ve forgotten the boys!” As you can imagine, my husband instantly whipped the car around and raced back to the church. I jumped out and ran to find them. I had forgotten that my daughter had asked me to take our grandsons home with us, and when she heard how we almost left them, I’m sure it made her think twice about asking us again. I suppose that’s something most of you can relate to, isn’t it? We all know what it’s like to unintentionally forget someone we love.

In Luke’s Gospel, we read a similar story. Having completed their annual pilgrimage to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph set out to return to Nazareth. After they had gone a day’s journey, they began to search for their son among relatives and acquaintances. Although they had presumed that he was somewhere in the group, they soon discovered that he was nowhere to be found. They returned to Jerusalem immediately and, after searching frantically for him for three days, they found him in the temple, in dialog with the teachers (Luke 2:41–45).

It seems to me that in some ways we’re like Jesus’ parents. Let

me explain what I mean. By definition, we Christians joyously celebrate our Passover Lamb, our salvation with Jesus, but then, like his parents, we eagerly head on back to Nazareth, back to living out our beliefs *without a conscious awareness or acknowledgment of his presence*. Of course, we assume that he is somewhere nearby. We haven't felt his absence because we're so preoccupied with living life for him.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that he has left us behind. No, he has promised never to do that. What I am saying is that once we've been saved, once we've understood and accepted the message of the gospel, the person and work of the Redeemer becomes secondary to what we're focused on—living the Christian life. We love to remember him at Christmas and Easter. We adore him as the baby in the manger; we rejoice over the empty tomb. But aside from these two seasons, our attention is primarily focused on us, on our performance, on our spiritual growth. We know that the incarnation and resurrection are important truths to our initial salvation, but that's pretty much where their impact ends.

Let me illustrate what I mean. If I asked you, "Where did the ongoing incarnation of Jesus Christ intersect with your life yesterday?" would you have an answer? We all know that the crucifixion is important for our initial salvation, but what did it mean to you this morning? Does Calvary inform and warm your heart when you're waiting in line at the grocery store or hearing bad news from your doctor? Does his sinless life comfort you when you realize that you've just sinned in that same way *again*? In other words, *is he significantly relevant to you in your daily walk with him?*

I don't assume any malice toward him on our part in our virtual desertion of the Redeemer. Instead, I think the problem is that the answer to the question, Is Jesus relevant? is probably something like, "I guess he should be, but I don't see how." I think that we move past him because we don't really understand how God's love to us in the gospel applies to our lives practically, here on this side of Calvary. Yes, of course we know that he died for our sins and

rose again, but what does that have to do with living life here in the twenty-first century? Again, how relevant is the gospel, the work of Jesus Christ, to you?

Perhaps another facet of our desertion of the Savior, and a more insidious one, is that, although all orthodox believers view salvation as his work, we believe that living the Christian life is solely ours. Yes, salvation is a wonderful gift, we think, but Christian living is where we've got to concentrate now.

I believe that most Christians think fondly of Jesus, are sincerely grateful for salvation, and remember his name as a tagline when they pray, but they don't see his work and life as something to contemplate every moment of every day. I have to admit that until fairly recently I, too, pursued godliness without much thought of him. Among those who would classify themselves as serious Christians, who study the Bible and want to please God, my guess is that the thought of revisiting the gospel seems like a step back into kindergarten. To put it another way, if I told you that this is a book about the gospel, would you automatically assume that it's for unbelievers?

What I'll be asking you to consider throughout this book may be summarized in one simple question: *In your pursuit of godliness, have you left Jesus behind?* Since this might be a new question for you, let me ask you a few more that will help clarify the answer.

- If I said that we're going to spend page after page considering God's love, would you feel the need to stifle a yawn? What does his transforming love mean to you today?

- Are you more focused on your performance for him or his for you?

- At the end of the day is there a rest in your soul because of him, or is there guilt and a determination that tomorrow you're going to "do better"?

- Do you still feel the need to prove that you're not "all that bad"? Do you get angry when people criticize or ignore you?

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- You know that Jesus is the Door. Do you see how he is your life? Could you tell me exactly how he has transformed your daily life?

As we work through the answers to these questions together, I want you to be encouraged. This is an endeavor that your Savior is passionate about. His great accomplishments, so personally costly to him, are not to be relegated to some introductory course that gets stored in the garage with old yearbooks. No, they're to be constantly mused on and relentlessly rejoiced in by all who know them.

So let's ask him to enlighten us now as we embark upon our journey back to Jerusalem, searching for the Beloved Son. Unlike his parents, we won't have to search frantically. No, he is joyfully and patiently waiting to reacquaint you with his love and to make his undiminished presence the most relevant aspect of your life. Let's spend time thinking about our Savior and how what he has already done is meant to be the most significant characteristic of our faith and life for him.

REMEMBERING HIS LOVE

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.

J O H N 3 : 1 6



It's vital that you know where we're going in this book before you begin, so in case you skipped the introduction, please take a moment to go back to it. Thanks!

In this chapter we're going to look at God's love as seen in the gospel, and then we'll consider why it is important for us to remember it. I know that you probably think you've heard all of this before. Let me assure you, it's my assumption that you have. I know this good news won't be *new* news for many of you. Even so, please let me beg your indulgence while we traverse this well-worn highway again, in search of our Savior.

WHAT IS GOD'S LOVE AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

When Forrest Gump humbly proclaimed, "I may be stupid, Jenny, but I know what love is," in a way he spoke for us all, didn't he? We all think we know what love is. Each of us has our own definitions of love, no matter how naïve or sophisticated we are.

Although we might have some conflicting definitions, this book will remind you what *real* love looks like—love that has given sacrificially, transforms powerfully, and lasts eternally. Simply put, real love was profoundly and perfectly personified in Jesus Christ, the God-Man who assumed human flesh, lived a perfect life, was executed on a Roman cross, rose from the dead, and then ascended

to heaven, still embodied in human flesh, to pave the way for each of us. Real love is personified in the gospel, and living in its light is utterly essential for our transformation.

Unacquaintedness with our mercies [and] our privileges . . . makes us go heavily, when we might rejoice; and to be weak, where we might be strong in the Lord. . . . *This is the will of God, that he may always be eyed as benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable. Let, then, this be the saints' first notion of the Father—as one full of eternal, free love towards them.*¹

It's essential for us to think about God's love today because it is only his love that can grant us the *joy* that will strengthen our hearts, the *courage* that will embolden us in our fight against sin, and the *assurance* that will enable us to open up our lives to him so that he might deal powerfully with our unbelief and idolatry. If we're not completely convinced that his love is *ours right now*—fully and unalterably ours—we'll always hide in the shadows, focusing on our performance, fearing his wrath. Prayer will be hard because we won't want to approach him or be transparent before him. Witnessing will be a chore, for who would want to talk to others about a god who is demanding, angry, or cold? If we don't consciously live in the light of his love, the gospel will be secondary, virtually meaningless, and Jesus Christ will fade into insignificance. Our faith will become all about us, our performance, and how we think we're doing, and our transformation will be hindered.

What must we remember? Simply that God loves us so much that he crushed his Son so that we might be his and that this love isn't based on our worthiness or performance. His love doesn't fluctuate from day-to-day. It was settled the moment he set it upon you before the foundation of the world. God has spoken to us about his love and the gospel in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Will that love transform the way you live today? It's meant to, but exactly how?

THE GOSPEL . . . AGAIN?

I realize that you might be thinking, “Oh yes, God’s love, Jesus and the gospel . . . yes, yes, I know all about that. It’s true that I love that story, and it’s good to remember it so that I can tell it to my unsaved friends, but frankly, isn’t that just a little elementary now that I’m saved? I mean, the gospel is great for those beginning the Christian life, but I think I’ve grasped it already. After all, I am a Christian! Are you saying that there’s something more here I need to consider?” Yes, in fact I’m saying that if you neglect to focus on God’s love for you in Christ, your Christianity will soon be reduced to a program of self-improvement—just one of many methods to help you “get your act together.” And although that might seem like a worthy goal, it isn’t true Christianity at all. True Christianity is not a program of self-improvement; it’s an acknowledgment that something more than self-improvement is needed. What’s needed is *death* and *resurrection*: gospel words, gospel constructs, gospel motives, gospel power—a loving Redeemer.

To illustrate what I mean about our need to remember God’s love for us in the gospel, I’ve written out a very significant number of verses that encapsulate this message. Because I assume that you’re already pretty familiar with these passages, their context, and what they signify, I’m not going to explain them. Instead, I’ll let them speak directly to you. So please fight the temptation to skim over them because you think you already know about them. Instead, please ask the Spirit to make them live to you again.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3–6)

By the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners. (Rom. 5:19)

HOW GOD'S LOVE TRANSFORMS OUR IDENTITY

For there is no distinction; . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:22–23)

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:3)

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped . . . [was] born in the likeness of men. (Phil. 2:5–7)

Her offspring . . . shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28)

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” (Luke 1:30–32)

The time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6–7)

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day . . . a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10–11)

So by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:19)

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” (Matt. 21:37)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. (Isa. 53:2)

“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22)

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph . . . the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:23, 38).

“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 4:18–19)

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isa. 53:3)

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:11)

He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. (Acts 10:38)

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14–15)

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. (Isa. 52:13)

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. . . . Blessed are you. . . . For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father.” (Matt. 16:16–17)

“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me?” (John 14:9)

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Matt. 16:23)

HOW GOD'S LOVE TRANSFORMS OUR IDENTITY

Jesus . . . made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.
(Phil. 2:5, 7)

He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:4–5)

“One of you will betray me.” (John 13:21)

“You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” (Mark 14:27)

“If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same. (Mark 14:31)

“Let not your hearts be troubled.” (John 14:1)

“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” (Matt. 26:38)

And . . . he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt. 26:39)

“So, could you not watch with me one hour?” (Matt. 26:40)

“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (Matt. 26:42)

He . . . found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. (Matt. 26:43)

“See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” (Matt. 26:45)

“Would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48)

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me. . . . Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” (Zech. 13:7)

And they all left him and fled. (Mark 14:50)

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? (Rom. 8:32)

Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. (Mark 14:55)

“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”

“I am.” (Mark 14:61–62)

“You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?”

“I am not.” (John 18:17)

“This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.” (Matt. 21:38)

“What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows. (Mark 14:63–65)

His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind. (Isa. 52:14)

“You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world.” (John 18:37)

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace . . . and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. (Mark 15:16–19)

So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” (John 19:4–6)

“Behold your King!” (John 19:14)

“Away with him, away with him, crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your King?”

“We have no king but Caesar.”

So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:15–16)

And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:20)

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull. . . . There they crucified him. (John 19:16–18)

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away . . . who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? . . . Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief. (Isa. 53:7–8, 10)

“Woman, behold, your son!” (John 19:26)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46)

“I thirst.” (John 19:28)

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46)

“It is finished.” (John 19:28–30)

Now . . . we have died with Christ. (Rom. 6:8)

“Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39)

But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. (John 19:34)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us. (Eph. 1:7–8)

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:8)

It is God who justifies. (Rom. 8:33)

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” (Rom. 4:7–8)

“Certainly this man was innocent!” (Luke 23:47)

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 Cor. 5:21)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:6, 8–10)

And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. (Matt. 27:59–60)

And they made his grave . . . with a rich man in his death. (Isa. 53:9)

HOW GOD'S LOVE TRANSFORMS OUR IDENTITY

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
(Col. 3:3)

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here.” (Mark 16:6)

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins. . . . But 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. (Eph. 2:1, 4–5)

We believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. . . . The life he lives he lives to God. (Rom 6:8–10)

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” (John 20:15)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1)

“Mary . . .” (John 20:16)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . 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. (Rom. 8:35, 38–39)

“Rabboni!” (John 20:16)

“I will never believe.” (John 20:25)

Christ died for our sins. (1 Cor. 15:3)

“Peace be with you.” (John 20:26)

Was buried . . . (1 Cor. 15:4)

“Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (John 20:27)

Was raised . . . (1 Cor. 15:4)

“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

He appeared . . . (1 Cor. 15:5)

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”
(John 20:29)

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)

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. (Rom. 8:34)

We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.
(1 John 2:1)

Christ is . . . seated at the right hand of God. (Col. 3:1)

. . . and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that . . . he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:6–7)

For 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!” (Rom. 8:15)

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:30)

HOW GOD'S LOVE TRANSFORMS OUR IDENTITY

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” (Rev. 11:15)

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. (Rev. 19:11–13)

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col. 3:4)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. . . . No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:1, 3–5)

If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? (Rom. 8:31, 33)

When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:10–12)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who . . . hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the

word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:11–14)

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father . . . 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. (Eph. 3:14, 17–19)

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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 4:9–10)

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:28)

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:21)

Time for a Heart Check

Please stop now for a moment of reflection. What did you think as you read the preceding verses? Allow me to suggest some possibilities:

- *Yada, yada, yada.* I've heard this a thousand times, maybe not just like that but a thousand times anyway. I need something new, perhaps a few concrete steps to help me change, not this same-old, same-old. . . . I know it should transform me, but I don't see how.

- *Oh dear, not again!* I know that I should be responding with some sort of gratitude because of God's love for me, but I already feel too guilty. This story doesn't remind me of his love for me, only of the way I fail to love him. Frankly, this story terrifies me.

- *That reminds me . . .* I know that there was a time when that story moved my heart and made me thankful, but that hasn't hap-

pened in a long time. I'm really going to get my act together now. Really.

- *I'm different from other people.* There was a time when that story meant something to me but I've had a hard life. I guess I know that Jesus loves me, but I need someone with real arms to hug me and stop the pain. God's love is nice, but it just isn't tangible enough for me now.

- *I've tried to live the life I know God wants me to live, but I just can't.* I really don't see how that story about God's love in Christ intersects with my struggle with worry [or gambling, gluttony, pornography, pride, anger, or gossip]. I'm looking for something that will make me better so that I can stop hurting people and live a productive, healthy life.

- *Sorry, too busy to read. Can you text-message me? Gotta run!*

Where did you find yourself in those responses? I'll admit that sometimes it's hard for me to connect the dots between God's love and my daily life. I continually strive and frequently fail to see how his love in Christ is all that I need and to understand how to live with the gospel motivating and informing every decision, every action, every word.

If you found yourself in any of the statements above, don't worry. Unless we're very intentional about meditating on these truths, they slip from our thoughts like misty dreams that evaporate in the morning light. That's why Luther said we must "take heed, then, to embrace . . . the love and kindness of God. . . . [and to] daily exercise [our] faith therein, entertain no doubt of God's love and kindness."²

I've written this book because grasping the reality of God's love will provide every answer to every question we have about him and ourselves. It will tell us who we are, why we're here, and how we're supposed to do what we're supposed to be doing. Delighting in God's love will transform everything about us, including who we are, or our identity. This love is illustrated for us in Scripture, and particularly in the story we call "the gospel."

Oh, here's one more item you'll need to know. I'll be using the term *gospel* very frequently in this book, so I want to define what I mean here. The gospel was summarized in the verses above. It is the incarnation, sinless life, substitutionary death, burial, bodily resurrection, ascension, and eternal reign of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. I'm going to be using the term *gospel* as shorthand for all those truths, and I'll also be helping you see how they are meant to tangibly impact every facet of your life today.

So now that you've gotten a taste of where we're going, let me give you a personal word of encouragement. If you're in Christ today, God's promise of relationship and identity with him is rooted in his ageless love: *I have loved you so much that I sent my Beloved Son to bring you to myself, that in believing this you might have eternal relationship with me. I will be your God, you will be my child. Rest and rejoice in all my love has done to transform you.* If, on the other hand, you're not sure you're a Christian, won't you please turn to the appendix right away? That way you'll know what I mean when I talk about God's love for us in Christ and what our response needs to be. Thank you!

In chapter 2, we'll start our discussion about God's astounding love with an initial look at who we are and how his love shapes what we'll call "our identity." For now, though, here's a reminder to us about the depth of his love for us: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [the one who bears and takes away his wrath] for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Who are we? We are people who are being transformed by his love.

REALIZING HOW GOD'S LOVE TRANSFORMS YOUR IDENTITY AND LIFE

At the end of each chapter, you'll find questions to challenge you. I'll also suggest further Bible reading aimed at helping you understand the truths presented. Please plan to take the time to do this practical work, as the point of this book is not mere information but the

transformation of your heart and life. These practical exercises will help you as you cooperate with the Spirit's purpose in this pursuit. You might also gather together with a friend or two to go through this study and the questions.

1) Do you have any hopes or expectations as you begin this study?

2) What is your response to the statement "If we're not completely convinced that his love is *ours, right now, fully and unalterably ours*, we'll always hide in the shadows, be focused on our performance, fearing his wrath"? Do you agree or disagree? How often do you think about God's love for you as demonstrated in the gospel? Do you just assume it?

3) Quote John 3:16. Does it inform your daily walk?

4) My premise for this book is that many of us are so focused on living the Christian life, we've left Jesus behind. Do you agree or disagree? Interact with that statement.

5) Summarize in four or five sentences what you've learned from this chapter.

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