

Volume 2, Day 1: Loving Into Greater Living

Trying to perform perfectly before God is a bit like learning to play the piano. If you're not going to play the piano until you can sit down and play Beethoven's Symphony to absolute perfection, you'll never play the piano. Same thing's true about learning to follow God. If you have to get it right, if every note has to be in tune, if you've got to play on the right tempo, on the right beat, you'll be exhausted. God doesn't invite us into a relationship by acting as in our performance of a role in a play.

God invites us into personal relationship because He wants us to know Him intimately. He realizes that for Him to connect with humanity will include both joy and misery, tranquility and struggle and many other opposite emotions. So start with something simple. What can you trust God with? Then listen for the smallest voices and gentlest emotional nudges He puts into your heart and soul.

Be aware of this. There are going to be things that make Him seem more gracious to you and make you more gracious to other people. I know that many claim that listening to God is only by reading God's Word. That cannot be so since over 99 percent of all human beings have never seen a single written word from scripture. So listen up. He's talking to you right now.

People are worried about God telling them to shoot their neighbor or cheat their business partner. If you hear that, it's not Him. God is love not hatred. God leads us into a gracious way of living with Him and with each other. It might be more about apologies to other people, not confrontations with them. It's inviting them into a greater life, not convincing them that they suck. And when you can learn to live in that space, you become more loving and engaging in the world of your influence.

Volume 2, Day 2: Giving Credit to Whom It Is Due

It's not about perfection. You've got to lose your need to be perfect. You must abandon the need to get everything right every day or otherwise you can't follow Him. Once you've done this, you are ready to go on a different journey or at least a better route to take you to your destination.

This new way requires that you be ready to listen carefully to His small voice. You must be ready to instantly follow Him when He gives you His guidance. You must pay attention to see what unfolds as the day goes on. If you can only trust Him to the degree that you are able to do everything right or perfectly, then basically you're still trusting in your own performance. And that will never be good enough.

So how do you know if you're listening to His voice and not your own? Well, I think it's this way. As you are listening to Him, is the Fruit of the Spirit becoming more evident to others in your life? Are you offering more grace, more tenderness and more humility? When I surrender the moment to the Holy Spirit within me, then and only then, is His Fruit seen. The Fruit of the Spirit is not my spirit's fruit.

Have you ever noticed that the way God speaks to us is **not** with blinding clarity? It is not so obvious that we should declare, "Thus says the Lord," or "God told me to." Many of the people I've met who use that kind of language about listening to God really are **not**. It might be better to say things like, "I have a sense that God might want this," or "I'm thinking God is leading me to do this." Some people are actually 'using God's name in vain' to add authority to their own opinions. Unless you are completely certain that it is His directive, don't claim that it is. However, it is better to be misunderstood and judged than to not give God specific credit when it belongs to Him.

Volume 2, Day 3: How to Become Confident in Him

Some Christians may never get to the point of such confidence in knowing God's voice as to proclaim that, "The Lord told me." But to be sure, you must start where you are and journey on from here. Consider each nudging in your spirit as God's Holy Spirit communicating to you with audible expression. This will take you into a different reality than you have formerly known of living and loving Him. This is by way of the route known as 'intimacy.'

Jesus said, "Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." That's how you know you're following Him. It's when you're more at rest in the Father's care and His affection for you. It increases your desire to share it with those around you.

No one will ever be particularly interested in sharing your anxiety, worry or fear. But many will want to experience the "peace that surpasses understanding," when it is observed in action. When you are overwhelmed by the stress of the trials in your life, you have no energy left to help bear another's problem. But when you are so trusting God that you let Jesus carry your load, you have freedom and desire to help others.

When Jesus told His disciples that they would be identified as His disciples by their unconditional love for them, He was speaking to the issue of trust. Your love for others will be unhindered by your own problems when and only when you have unloaded them onto Jesus' shoulders. This is when the love of God is fully alive in your heart. And God's love is the compelling force that draws all men to Himself. To fully love God is to fully trust God in all things.

Volume 2, Day 4: Engaging in a Garden of Fellowship

A lot of people talk to me about whether they should start going to church. They ask where they need to be involved in community where they can engage in fellowship. We all do engage in fellowship in some community. It is simply human. You likely engage with multiple groups of common unity. Now that you are born again, it helps to be linked in a cultural group that is intent to follow God. Most Christians find this in a church. However, church can be a group of believers from various churches. Fellowship is important!

I'm not as interested in people getting into a church right away or getting into fellowship as I am interested in people finding a conversation with God that expands into a conversation with other people. You will end up in fellowship either way. And there is a good chance that one of the places you have fellowship will be in a local church assembly.

God loves community. He is a community of three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit living, working and communing together. And when they invite people into that relationship, they also invite people into relationships with each other in community. Fellowship in God is irresistible. It's not an obligation. Just like my wife and her gardens. Wherever she lives, gardens bloom, because she is a gardener.

She loves the beauty of flowers and the harmony of various colors and plant textures coming together to make this beautiful masterpiece. That's God's passion too. He is gardening people to build this living temple as God connects brothers and sisters in local areas as well as around the world under one head, Christ. So, as your conversation with God grows, so will fellowship.

Volume 2, Day 5: Be Humble Enough to Ask for Help

With other people alongside to share this journey with you, fellowship with and in God unites our hearts. It is not about sitting in a meeting together. It's actually growing in a conversation with other brothers and sisters who are experiencing the same life in God or something similar to what you are. We don't have to look alike any more than all those flowers look alike. It's the harmony and unity of the whole that makes it special to God and will make it special to your life as well.

That's why I talk about community, not as an obligation. You need fellowship. It's actually an irresistible reality. Knowing God and knowing his family will cause you to experience great life and health together. Now, how do you find those relationships? If you know an older brother or sister who's on this journey, and I don't mean older by age, ask them to help you. They may live just down the road a bit from you and they know things about God that you would like to know. Don't be too proud to admit that they've got a journey you would like to have. Let them help you with yours. Ask them.

Most people enjoy helping others, especially by invitation. It's as simple as asking, "Could we get together once in a while and explore what this journey's like?" So maybe you don't know someone like that, but you've got some friends asking similar questions. Explore a similar journey with them, maybe even watching Lifestream.org Engage videos together. Simply get together once in a while. It doesn't have to be every week. It doesn't have to be a formal meeting. Meet over a table in a coffee shop or in your home. Explore this relationship with God together. You will be amazed at what your insights, combined with theirs, will produce in revelations of the love of God.

Volume 2, Day 6: The Right Kind of Conversations

Fellowship can be around any one of a vast number of common interests. Some are about sports. Others are about vocational pursuits. Still others are about any other topic. So fellowship which will assist you in this particular journey, must be about common interest in knowing God in an intimate way.

In your talks with others there are several useful questions to be asked and answered. "What's God showing you?" "Where are you struggling?" "Where are you getting it right?" "Where do you feel like you've grown due to something that was a significant struggle in your life?"

Here's what you'll notice. The conversations I want you to engage in are not religious conversations. What I mean by religious conversations, is ones that usually make you feel accused or they focus on your performance in a behavioral sense. They feed your guilt. They make you stressful, competitive, or conflicted. They make you want to pretend to be something you're not, instead of living in the reality of what you in reality are. If you're caught up in those, you're stuck in a religious fellowship, not a relationship.

The kind of conversations that induce loving feelings toward God are very different from religious ones. I'm referring to those that are more relaxed. They're real. They are genuine. They're enlightening and refreshing, as well as encouraging. You go away from them wanting to trust God more, wanting to follow Him with more of your own heart. Those who set you at ease in God's life are those who are having a better conversation with God than the performance overtones often associated with religion. You might actually find these good conversations outside of church circles.

Volume 2, Day 7: Don't Worry, Don't Hurry

Although you might find great fellowship in an established church congregation, if you attend one, it may not be God's first priority to connect you with these kinds of conversations, so don't avidly pursue church attendance or membership. In His time, God will bring you into His family in circles which most promote the unconditional love of God and His amazing grace. The Bible says, "The Holy Spirit sets us in the family as He desires."

He'll bring the right people alongside you when the right time comes. It may happen first on the internet. A lot of people do conversations by email, texts or Internet virtual meetings. He will connect you with folks who have a similar passion for God. These can grow into some of the most lovely and deeply satisfying relationships. But eventually God will give you some local face-to-face connections.

Some of the people He gives you to walk with may even be just starting their journey. They may not even know they're on one yet. But they're people with whom you can be really genuine and vulnerable. They're people you can care about. And if you find that reality, you find the hope of a relationship growing that will invite you into the larger community God is building around the world.

There is a mutual mentoring discipleship program on the Internet **DayPrimer.com** which is entitled **Now That You Believe -- Abandon to God** which enables two people, even if neither is theologically trained, with the Holy Spirit between them, to explore a collection of writings of men and women inspired by their passionate intimacy with God. These guided readings of Scripture, Devotionals, and Books spawn exploration of the heart of God such that the individual revelations, when shared face-to-face, erupt into even more inspirations for both.

ENGAGING God -- Alan - Jacobsen

Volume 2, Day 8: Misery Caused by Contradiction

What do we do when God still seems distant in our attempts to come to know him? One person wrote, “I listened to the transition series eight years ago, and in that series you gave similar advice as to how to begin the journey. The next day I started to pray, as you suggested, I stuck with it for a while, probably one week, and then I turned to other things that I thought would help me on this journey. Today, it still feels that I'm just as far away from God as I was eight years ago. I struggle with anxiety and depression, and fear that I will not have the relationship with God you describe.”

Another man wrote, “Your books have been very liberating for me, but having been on this journey for a good four years now, despite what can only be described as an authentic supernatural experience with Jesus, some 20 years ago, I have never felt more distant from God. My depression is acute right now, so I think about suicide many times a day. I am currently stressed with my stomach tied in knots continually. I have constant feelings of shame and guilt. I literally beg the Lord for help and feel like he just ignores me.”

If your experience resembles these, you have some wrong beliefs. You might also need medical attention to adjust chemical imbalances if they are hindering your comprehension. All of our feelings are triggered by what we believe. Fear as a child was stimulated by our belief in boogey men and Santa Claus. “He knows when you ... so be good...” Even when you believe many right things, when something else you believe contradicts a ‘right’ thing, you will experience confusion, frustration and misery. So as you hear new truth, find the conflicting old truths and dismiss them from your gallery of beliefs. This is a major obstacle to intimacy. Let God alone guide you into truth.

Volume 2, Day 9: Feelings Follow Faith

Your relationship with God will only become deeply satisfying when you let His Holy Spirit guide you into God's truth, not the truth which has been passed on to you by well-meaning but sadly mistaken trusted sources. You may even have deduced these beliefs through your own wrong 'common sense.' Relationships in general, and particularly with God, require correct information about the other party. I was personally very dissatisfied with my relationship with God after 40 years of expecting God to do or be something that He is not!

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The fear of the Lord is respecting what He says about you and about Himself. If you will give yourself permission to change what you believe, that is when the wisdom of God's can finally change your heart. When you believe what the Holy Spirit tells you instead of your formerly trusted information, He brings peace as all confusion is eliminated. "You cannot be wrong, **sincerely enough**, to be right!" And you cannot properly interpret what is being said if you are mentally impaired.

Depression is rarely a cause. It is an effect. Usually it is the effect of biased reception of what is being expressed by others. And bias is simply the by-product of previously formed beliefs. The gospel of Jesus Christ is an example of this. The Pharisees called for Jesus' execution because their religious bias hindered them from accepting His newly proclaimed truth. So if you continue to languish, making little progress in these new teachings, explore the biases of your own beliefs that keep you from embracing these truths. Our emotions follow our beliefs as water seeks the lowest level. So, if you want to change your feelings, give yourself permission to change your beliefs.

Vol. 2, Day 10: Relationship Is Not Behavior Management

If it's difficult for you to find intimacy with God, then try to find out what it is that causes you to believe things about yourself that promote depression. Seek out a professional counselor or life coach who has obviously attained to this love, joy and peace we are encouraging. This will not be just any professional or religious counselor or coach. It cannot be one who focuses on behavior management. It must be one that has made this journey. No others can help you unpack this.

If your emotional state is not such that you can be responsive to God's leading, this is an impossible journey. Actually, until you surrender all of your beliefs to God and let His Holy Spirit guide you as to which ones are valid and which are not, you cannot take this journey. Paul said in Romans 12:1 and 2. "I beg of you, brothers, to present your bodies (heart, soul and mind) as a living sacrifice... Don't be conformed to the thinking of this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you can distinguish what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Notice that Paul states here that your mind must be renewed (**new thinking, new beliefs**) in order to be transformed!

Most of us dread believing outside our own box. You may have even heard someone say about this journey, "If you're the only one who believes this, you must be wrong!" My response is, "Then Jesus must have been wrong in suffering the Crucifixion since He was the only one who believed that He should." Only a tiny percentage of 'born again' persons begin this journey, let alone complete it! Just admit to God that you cannot do this, and **let Him** do it for you. "...Not of works, so that no one can boast!"

Volume 2, Day 11: Anything Worthwhile Is Worth Time

For those of you who say, "I'm trying to get this connection to God, but it's not happening, I want to draw attention to the person who said he tried it for a week. A week is not long at all and we're really not trying it. This is about opening your heart to the degree that let's God make himself known to you.

Many people are afraid that God is ignoring them or He's not going to do for them what He does for others. We know that God is not a respecter of persons. I wouldn't be talking about having a relationship with God in these writings, if I didn't think it was just as available to you as it is to me. God wants us to learn how to live inside His love wrapped in intimate relationship with Him.

We've got to appreciate the fact that, when the transcendent God is connecting with broken humanity, it's a journey of transformation more dramatic than the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. It takes intentionality and resolve. It takes time. It requires discipline such that we are willing to suffer greatly in order to attain it.

If God seems distant from you, number one, it's not about your sin. Almost all of us go to that place. Somehow, if I could just give up this evil habit or this bad thought, then God would make Himself known to me. When you think that, this journey is impossible, your life is miserable and so is your relationship with God. The second thing, God's not ignoring you. God is always pursuing you and trying to make Himself known to you. It is us who are not seeing it. Paul says to unbelievers, "... in Him, we all live and move and have our being." If it's true for unbelievers, how much more true it is for seekers of intimacy with God.

Volume 2, Day 12: Helter-Skelter or Divine Design

Hopefully we can agree that, from God's point of view, the problem is not your sin. It's not because God's ignoring you. And it's not because it's too difficult. It may be because of misplaced expectations. I'm expecting God to show up in a certain way or to have a certain feeling or to replicate an experience. Relationships evolve naturally and spontaneously. There are no prescriptions for them.

These devotional messages are intended to be an encouragement to help you take this journey. Every stimulus has its limitations. And it might help you to know that you are the largest hindrance to your own growth in any relationship. This entire mentoring program is designed to help people catch the vision of a greater journey that is awaiting your entrance. But, if you noticed in the introduction, this journey is not a solo event. You may not need a host of helpers, but you need at least one who has made significant progress in this journey. It really comes to life person to person.

“ENGAGING God,” is a collection of tools and building specifications for erecting a life full of awe and wonder at the unconditional nature of God's love. This collection can, if you will embrace it, kindle a fire of desire in their heart. We want you to find another person to walk alongside you and encourage you to continue this journey for the rest of your life. “... until death do us part!” We want to encourage those who can't see to take their blinders off. God is always doing things in your life. Look for the signs and recognize them as sacred echoes or fingerprints of God. Sacred echoes are the same message coming from totally unrelated sources. And God's fingerprints are those events which, you see in retrospect, that God had intervened in a very evident manner.

Volume 2, Day 13: Be Aware of and Open to God's Love

I'm just sure God's doing everything possible to make Himself known. You're likely missing it because you are afraid to open your heart, soul and mind to new truth (that is truth that is new to you). Let yourself get out of your comfort zone of what you thought were closed issues. Let God show you what's going on. That's what I think was the meaning of Jesus' words about "asking, seeking and knocking." Don't stop seeking!

God wants to open doors to you that make His life happen in you. That is what the Holy Spirit was dispatched to do. Ask God to show you someone who can help you on this journey. A brother or sister can be a great help. Someone more mature than you in the faith may well be much younger than you. So don't limit your vision to older, wiser, more educated or highly credentialed people. Actually you will likely find the best help in persons who are quite 'poor in spirit' (humble).

Just engaging others in conversations that help you focus on what God is doing will take you a long way down this road. A friend of mine from Florida shared an illustration he uses to help pastors recognize how community expresses itself in the world. He takes them out to a parking lot and they're looking at the asphalt. They notice finally that little sprigs of grass are growing up in the cracks. That's how the kingdom of God comes to us.

It's what Jesus said about the mustard seed. It starts very small, but it grows very large. Most of us look for some cathartic, euphoric experience that finally affirms God's presence with me (actually **in** me). It actually awakens in much simpler ways. There are fingerprints, sacred echoes and emotional nudges in our spirits. He's awakening you to an intimate relationship with Him.

Volume 2, Day 14: Tranquility Facilitates Intimacy

My friend from Australia told a banker one day that he was struggling to hear God's voice, struggling to find if God is real for him. The banker said, "Listen. Why don't you go to the most peaceful place you know where you really feel peace. While you are there, ask God what you want to ask Him. Then wait to hear what He puts in your mind or lets you feel in your soul."

My friend responded, "I have this little pond down at the bottom of my property. I always feel peaceful there." And he went there and it opened his spirit to have the kind of communication with God we're talking about. You may not have a pond on your property or personal garden, but being in a quiet place seems to be a helpful part of opening our heart to detect where and how God wants to reveal Himself to us.

It's really the heart that quiets down enough so that we can hear a different rhythm than just the rhythms of our life, our fears, our anxieties and what we feel driven by in the world we live in. Concerns about what other people think of us and by how successful we are. These distractions hinder cultivating an inner life of listening to the still small voice and of knowing God intimately.

"Take no thought . . ."

"Don't take the pressure of forethought upon yourself. It is not only wrong to worry, it is infidelity, because worrying means that we do not think that God can look after the practical details of our lives, and it is never anything else that worries us. Have you ever noticed what Jesus said would choke the word He puts in? The devil? No! It's the cares of this world. It is the little worries always that keep us from intimacy."

Volume 2, Day 15: Tranquility in the Midst of the Noise

Unfortunately, the culture we live in is lived at a frantic pace. The 21st century is probably worse than any other time in history. The distractions of technology with iPods, smart phones, computers, video games and other entertainment like TV, movies, sports and work, and you just name it, our lives are full of noise. Our lives are full of those things that draw our hearts away from God. We have difficulty finding a quiet space where God can most easily reveal Himself to our inner being. And, of course, that is the essence of relationship.

Getting away from that frantic pace, the demands and distractions of our world, is essential to eliminating the fears and anxiety that these distractions cause us. Living largely distracted is the very thing that will dull our hearts to spiritual sensitivity that is within us. We have to make a choice at some point, after finding God in the quiet place, to develop a relationship with God which brings tranquility to the noisiest places on earth. The journey ultimately enables us to take the quiet of God out into the noise of the natural life. We discover that it is the quiet of our hearts. It really isn't the place of quiet after all.

It's really the heart that quiets down enough so that it listens to a different rhythm than just the rhythms of our life, our fears, our anxieties and what we feel driven by in the world we live in. It's listening to the still small voice and of knowing God intimately. I look to quiet my heart everywhere I happen to go. It's knowing that He is with me and providing opportunities for Him to say anything He might want to say to me. And most importantly, it's about letting God express Himself using my human body.

Volume 2, Day 16: Even Adolescents Can Have This

It's when I'm driving to an appointment or talking to somebody that wants to talk to me. It's always finding that quietness in my current space. Maybe we can actually inject quiet into the situation we are in. We make it possible by reserving a place in our heart in which to be quiet. So, on the spur of the moment, we can draw into that place when we're in a difficult conversation or we're stressing about something at work. That will give us our mobile, ever present, quiet place into which we can retreat.

Jesus often spent a whole night walking with His Father in prayer, getting alone. It's an important part of this journey. You must not trivialize or dismiss it. And in that quiet space is where we can really listen to Him even if the outside noise is deafening. We live in the moment with our Most Significant Other instead of writhing in our fears about the future.

When my daughter was 12, she had a difficult decision to make and she thought I was going to tell her she needed to do a certain thing. She presented this to us. But we'd told her from age 12 on there were going to be more decisions she would make. So I said, "Honey, if you don't want to do what I think is best here, you are free to do what you think best." The next question she asked was intriguing. She asked, "Well, how do I make a decision then?" I said, "Well, if you don't have a preference that's clear, why don't you ask God? Maybe he does." She asked, "How do I do that?" I replied, "You'll go to your room, or some quiet place and just ask Him." I thought she'd do it over the next day or two. Twenty minutes later, she came back to me and she was actually choosing to do the thing she didn't want to do.

Volume 2, Day 17: Don't Try to Parent Adults

When our children reach the age at which they are able to make adult choices, it behooves us to change our role in their lives. It might be wise to follow the example of the Jews in their celebration of adulthood of their children. In this celebration (Bar Mitzvah or Bah Mitzvah) the father presents the son or daughter to God to report directly to Him as their parent. This may have been in our minds when we told our 12 year old daughter to consult God about a decision she was trying to make. It certainly took a lot of angst out of our teenage parenting.

Having experienced for the first time the challenge of approaching God as her father to advise her in making a decision, she actually chose to do what I would have preferred. But she would have been far more likely to push back against my wishes than she was with God. So, I asked, "What happened, darling?" She said, "I just got up and sat on my bed and I just said, "God, do you have a will here? Is there something you want me to do?" And it just seemed clear in my heart that he wanted me to do what I didn't want to do. And since I sensed what God wanted, I made that decision with great joy.

Listening to God is not complicated. He doesn't always speak what we want when we want Him to. If you've been asking God for weeks, months or years and He hasn't responded, as we've said before, "Relax. He'll let you know when you need to know. But the more you find quiet in spirit, the more you'll experience His peace.

Volume 2, Day 18: You Create Your Own Quiet

One of my favorite passages in the message is in Matthew chapter 9, verses 28 through 30. Jesus is talking to His disciples. “Are you tired? Are you worn out? Are you burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest, walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't put anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”

I can't emphasize enough how much God and you need to find a quiet place in your heart and life because that's where He makes Himself known. It's then that we're more open to hearing His still small voice, feeling that nudge and being drawn into that quiet place. You make time for everything you really want to do. This journey requires that you make some time to learn, make time to live freely and lightly. Find a place just to sit in silence. Even if you don't think of anything or hear anything, just sit for a moment at rest in His presence. Enjoy what God is bringing into your experience in this moment.

The more you think about Him you'll be less drawn into what the world is frenzied about. The more you feel His unconditional love for you, the less you will be tempted to find love in unseemly places. The more you love God the more you will trust Him and want to serve His purposes. Abraham's perfect trust in God put him in the Hall of Fame of Faith!

ENGAGING God -- Alan - Jacobsen

Volume 2, Day 19: Why the Bible Is Boring

I received an email from Angela. This is what she wrote, "I was brought up in a school led by nuns, and they really made the Bible boring to me. Now I'm starting to live in God's love and I sometimes feel like I have to read the Bible. But it turns me off to God. The Psalms are okay. The gospels are okay. But to be honest, reading them does not teach me anything and I find them uninspiring. Don't get me wrong, I sense God's love a lot of the time, and often I feel his love for people around me. So I'm not saying that I don't feel a connection to God. I'm just bored by the Bible. It does nothing for me."

Angela, you're probably not alone. Whether it's from some nuns or Sunday school somewhere, sometimes people trying to help us love this book may have bored us to death with it. Or they may have turned it into a rule book that makes it intimidating to read. Or maybe we hear the voices from the pulpit telling us how evil and horrible we are. And we read it like this. All we see is that man falls so short of God's expectations. And for many, this book either becomes boring or at least not helpful to their journey of life or their affections for God.

I meet more and more believers who tell me they really don't need the Bible. They have the Holy Spirit. Well, you know what? We get both. We get this incredible book written over thousands of years, by a variety of men who see God making Himself known, over a great span of time, as God's revelation unfolded in the world. Nope, this isn't a rule book. This isn't the owner's manual to the human machine. This is God, who **is** love, revealing His life, His purpose and His wisdom in the world. But you have to read it in a way where that stuff unpacks for you.

Vol 2, Day 20: The Bible Is the Greatest Love Story

The Bible has been misused for a long time. Boy, a lot of religionists have used this to beat people to death, to make us feel unworthy of the God who loves us. Instead of this poor view, see it as the story of the living, loving God breaking through our misery and brokenness. It reflects how we have lost sight of Him. We thought of Him as being this angry taskmaster waiting to strike us when we misbehave. But the Bible was written so that we could discover, in Jesus, that He is a God of great love and mercy. It's that story that you want to capture.

If you don't know that story, you might want to check out the "Jesus lens" videos at thelivestream.org website. These and other resources help people view this book through the eyes of Jesus. These videos present God, interpreting the Bible in a lovely way. They help people to come to know God as He is, 'love itself in all of its glory.'

The Bible, when properly understood, grounds us in His love. I'd say this to Angela, "You don't have to read this. We get to! When you're ready to be invited into this book, not because someone says you must, but because the Holy Spirit is inviting you to discover God here, then He will lead you through it in a way that will be transforming to you." Otherwise, we're just left to following our own impressions, and though I love that the Spirit of God speaks to us, and we've been talking about how God makes Himself known in a variety of ways, that's still never complete, never full, never absolutely clear. Neither are our interpretations of scripture. Sometimes we can interpret things very wrongly, but when you put the voice of the Spirit alongside the revelation of scripture, you have two things that confirm that "God **IS** love!"

Volume 2, Day 21: How to Read the Bible

So how do you find a life of love for God in the Bible if it's boring to you or if you feel like it's just a condemning book? Well, I'd say first of all, don't rush into it. Learning how to read this book, learning how to draw life from it, is a journey for me too. It is the most important book I own. I look at it almost every day and every time I'm reading a scripture, I'm listening to see, is there something in here God's revealing to me about His unconditional love?

Here are some things that might help you. Begin reading the gospels. You might read them for two or three years. The more you know and feel the love of Jesus, by reading about how he treats people, the more you believe that God's love to us is most certainly unconditional. His love is never based on our behaviors or motives. He loves us because He made us for that expressed purpose! And then maybe move on to Acts and then maybe the epistles, and then eventually go back to the Old Testament and see how the stage was set. The Old Testament no longer governs how we approach God, but it helps us appreciate grace and how magnificent it is.

I like saying this about the Old Testament. I think it's the story of God's rescue, oftentimes through the eyes of people who were scared of God, who regarded him as mean and doing horrible things to his people. We find out in Jesus that God's not the cause of destruction in the story. Occasionally, he intervenes in history to further the purpose of salvation, but he's the God whose loving kindness is better than life. He's the God whose mercies never end. He's the God who wants to reveal himself every day to us.

Volume 2, Day 22: Value in Both Testaments

The Old Testament is historical evidence that something more than law was needed to rescue men from their own propensity to selfishly destroy those who would get in their way. The Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that mankind needs a savior because we could never save ourselves. Further, it reveals that every man in every generation has committed sin (relationship crimes). And in it, God declares repeatedly, “You do good, I’ll be good to you. But if you do bad, I’ll make you pay a dear price.” This was God’s way for several thousand years.

It would not be possible to appreciate grace, as expressed in the New Testament, which is the by-product of unconditional love, without understanding the Old Testament governance of God. Since all have sinned, the only fair and just way to accomplish redemption, is to make it accessible to every person. So, one valuable revelation of the Old Testament is that no one can merit their own salvation. The New Testament offers life with God by way of forgiveness and grace. The message of the New Testament is that you can do bad and get good!?!?

Salvation is provided by God, while serving justice to all, both the victims and the villains, by means of the highest price which any man can pay. He must sacrifice every bit of his pride on the altar of Christ’s sacrifice. The only thing that keeps a person from entering the kingdom of God is their insolent insistence on maintaining rebellious independence from God, just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In other words, you cannot appreciate unconditional love without understanding the true nature of mankind as revealed in both Testaments.

Volume 2, Day 23: Look for the Love in Every Verse

I think the Old Testament is the story of love told from the abused dog's perspective. When abused we end up hiding in the bushes. And the New Testament describes those who have come to know God's love through the revelation of the cross. They're kind of like the dogs who have finally come inside the house. They look at God in a whole different way since they have been exposed to His unconditional love. Once rescued, these dogs no longer see their masters through the eyes of shame or fear, but through the eyes of affection.

Don't take the difficult words of scripture as commands. Take them as promises. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he knows there's no way we can do it without Him. That's a promise. I'll teach you how to love your enemies the way my Father does. When you find things that are too difficult to understand, you know what I like to encourage people to do? Take what's here that you understand clearly and what makes sense to you. Fully enjoy what you do understand. You might have a lot of questions about things that don't make sense. Don't worry about those. You can sort those out down the road.

Instead, focus on what is clear. Look for the love in every passage. Listen for the voice that speaks to you. If it is not audible, it will be thoughts or sensations in your soul. Look for something you're doing that invites you to live a little more loving. That's the Holy Spirit opening you up, helping you see what God's doing to change your life. And maybe someday this book won't be boring to you. This will be encouragement to all the wisdom and knowledge that God wants to pour into your life.

Volume 2, Day 24: The Cart before the Horse

Sin seems to be the focus of almost everything we do in Christianity. The idea that our sin separates us from God, and even though He forgives us, we are still obsessed with sin, plagues us. We teach each other that we have to stop sinning. We must repent every time we sin if we are good Christians. And that doesn't work very well. Unfortunately, we have succumbed to the lie that our testimony is our better behavior. That is not what Jesus told His disciples about their testimony.

But I do get the question a lot. What do I do about my sins, my mistakes, my failures, the bitterness I have in my heart, the unforgiveness towards somebody? Do I have to fix that for Jesus to be close to me and for this journey to work? I actually want to say it works the other way around. That's why we haven't talked about sin a whole lot. Our sin is forgiven at the cross. God is no longer holding sin against us. That's not just the sins we committed before we came to know him. That's also true about the sins we still struggle with today.

How do we deal with that? The Old Testament, I think, left us with this idea that the more righteous we could be, the more relationship with God we could have. But Jesus says in the New Testament that isn't actually the way it works. He says, apart from me, you can do nothing, which would mean that until we know Him, we can't be changed. What is actually true is this. The more relationship with God, we'll have, the more righteous He'll make us to be. The transformation comes from Him, not from us. Our testimony is the transformation to be lovers like Jesus. We love without conditions of behavior or motive, just like Jesus loves. "Love Like Jesus Loves!"

Volume 2, Day 25: Behavior Management Systems

Dallas Willard called our religious systems, Sin Management Systems. It's all about getting people to stop sinning and living for God and working hard to do that. And yet that kind of behavioral conformity doesn't work very well. As a matter of fact, all other religions teach behavioral conformity and good character as the means to access God! You can shame people with sin and they'll try harder. You can put them in accountability groups and they'll try harder. But transformation only comes inside the work of Jesus. It's not something we do from within ourselves. And it is not about Christ strengthening us to do for the kingdom. "When we are weak, then He is strong. It is the Spirit of Christ alone that can do all things."

As long as we're focused on our sin, we're going to feel a sense of shame and a sense of unworthiness. This will not allow us to engage God in the way the cross allows us to engage Him. Sin doesn't count anymore. What counts is the invitation to come and know Him intimately and live in His life. Or to put it another way, it is letting Him live His own life in us today! Walking in the light, as John talks about it in his letter, is not about getting everything right. Walking in the light is not perfection. Walking in the light is I just being honest with God about me and bringing the reality of my stuff to God. I admit my failures, confusion and prideful pursuits. I bring those things into the light inside the relationship because God loves me.

Sin is basically this, sin is what we do when we don't think God loves us, and therefore we've got to grab for ourselves what God is not giving us.

Volume 2, Day 26: Transformation Takes A Lifetime

The more loved you are, the more you have a sense of God's affection for you. The greater your trust is in His ability to take care of you, the less you'll find an enticement to sin and the less pleasure that holds for us. That's the transformation that God wants. That's why Paul says in Romans, the mindset on the flesh is death. He's not just talking about the mind that indulges the flesh. He's also talking about the mind that seeks to abstain from the flesh because it's still a mindset on the flesh. So if you're going to wake up today and try to get sin out of you and try to be better for God, and measure how deep your relationship is based on how good you've been, oh, you're going to have to find another journey. This isn't going to work for you.

Our transformation is a lifetime journey of leaning more deeply into Him and finding myself increasingly free from the things that have bound up my life. God doesn't hate you because of your sin. God doesn't reject you because of your sin. What God calls sin is not the fun stuff He doesn't want us to have. Sin is the things that destroy us and our relationships with people around us. So even though they're forgiven at the cross, the natural consequences of sin in our lives still hurt us and the people closest to us. So God's not unconcerned about sin. You can't say, "Oh, He just loves me now. So who cares? I'll live whatever way I want." No inside a growing relationship with Him I want to be transformed. I want to be like He is in the world. And the only hope I have of becoming that is by living inside a relationship of growing affection for Him, which leads to growing trust in who He is, which means I don't have to grab for myself what God's not giving me.

Volume 2, Day 27: What To Do About Sin

So what do we do with sin and brokenness? The first thing is to recognize it where it exists. Resist it. If you can't, you can just say, "You know what? I'm not going to go that way anymore." Often I'm reading scripture and Paul will talk about anger, or the Proverbs will talk about integrity. And something in my life will illuminate and I say again, "You know what? I'm not living there and I want to be." And now I simply confess it. I take it to God.

You don't confess so God will forgive you. It's already been forgiven. Every sin you ever have or ever will commit has been forgiven. We confess so that we can see it as God sees it. Once we admit it, we invite God into our struggle with it and let Him fill up in us what that sin seeks to fill up. And then knowing Him and that His love is truly unconditional, you feel free to engage with Him in restitution or reconciliation.

If I've hurt somebody by my anger or if I've hurt somebody by my impatience, I get to go to them and say, I'm sorry. Is there some way I can make it up to you? And then we're part of one of the most redemptive things in the world, watching God overcome sin in our relationships to each other because we're quick to offer forgiveness, ready to be reconciled where relationships are broken.

Here's what's important for you to know. You are not your failures and your failures don't diminish God's affection for you. You are his beloved son or daughter. Keep living there and as you live there, this transformation will be accomplished by God and sin will take care of itself. The best reaction to committed sin is to say, "Thank you Jesus that this sin has already been paid for."

Volume 2, Day 28: Not Attached To Outcomes

Sin is not a separator of us from God. God has already covered it in Christ. We don't need the shame or unworthiness of it. We just need to invite God into that struggle and let Him become a partner in our process of overcoming something that actually can be a barrier to our affection. Unfortunately, even as Christians, it is our assumption that we know best for our life and that God somehow should meet our expectations. He should provide the things that we want. And then when He doesn't, our disappointments or our questioning the fact that He loves us becomes quite a problem.

A man took his Dad to Scotland to play golf at the original courses of the game after his father had been diagnosed with cancer. It was supposed to be that last Father-son, memorable trip to the land where golf was born and the son really wanted to make it special. So, he'd practiced hard, in the first round he played horribly, got angry, was throwing his clubs around, the trip was ruined.

After the golf round his Dad asked, "What are you doing? He said, "Well, Dad, I just wanted this to be so special. I'm trying so hard. And Dad looked at him and said, "What's special about this trip is that you and I get to be together if we play well, well, that's icing on the cake. You need to play NATO golf, NATO, not attached to outcome. Just hit your shot wherever it ends up, go there and hit the next shot, and don't be so committed to a good score that we lose the fun that we're supposed to have together. That really hit me. NATO golf. I think about it as NATO living. If I'm going to live with God attached to the outcome of the circumstances for the things that I want, this relationship's going to get ugly.

Volume 2, Day 29: Oh, God, Do This for Me

Peter found out early in his journey with Jesus that it was best not being attached to outcomes. Jesus starts telling him and the rest of the disciples, I'm going to go up to Jerusalem and I'm going to be delivered up to the elders of the city and I'm going to be executed. And Peter jumps in and says, "Oh, may it never be Lord," to which Jesus responds, "Get behind me. Satan!" What a powerful moment in Peter's life. Who wouldn't want his friend to be safe? Who wouldn't want to protect Jesus from the kinds of things Jesus was talking about? But what Jesus wanted Peter to understand and what it is that we all need to understand is that when we're looking out for our interests, we're not looking out for God's interests.

God does almost everything the opposite of the way we would. He told us, "If you want to save your life, you need to lose it. If you're trying to save it yourself, you surely will lose it." He said, "If you want to be first in the line, take the last place. If you want to be a leader, you must serve everyone else." His kingdom is counterintuitive to our normal human ways of thinking, and that strikes against our prayer requests. They are mostly the things we hope God does in our circumstances. If there's a certain outcome we want, if we're trying to get God to do it, this could be a pretty frustrating journey. It's especially frustrating if when He doesn't, you feel like He doesn't love you or doesn't care, or doesn't even know you exist.

Not attached to outcome. I love the thought of that. It allows God to be bigger than our own expectations. It means God doesn't have to revolve around our safety and our comfort. So my prayers in the situations I'm in are no longer, "God, do this." or "God do that."

Volume 2, Day 30: Satisfied with His Purposes

Sometimes I might ask God for a specific outcome. But to expect it to be granted or to push for it or to judge God in light of my disappointment, that will surely destroy my relationship with Him. Paul said in Ephesians 3, “When you know how broad, how deep, how wide God's love is, what you will discover is that He's able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond anything we could ask or think.” That's not saying, “If you pray for a two bedroom home, God might give you a three bedroom. Or if you pray for a Toyota, you might get a Lexus.

What Paul is saying is, “God is working out His purpose in our lives in ways we can barely conceive.” So when we don't get the thing we want or think we need, what we know is that God's doing something bigger than we can comprehend. Instead of complaining or trying to figure it out, I live inside what's already real in my life, in the pains as well as the joys. And instead of embracing my outcome, I get to embrace His. That's NATO living (not attached to the outcome). I'm attached to Him, and regardless of what outcome comes my way, He doesn't change. He's still going to be with me. And when I understand what He's doing in my situation and circumstances, then my trust in Him grows. No matter what happens to me, instead of being diminished because my expectations are disappointed, I am happy that His purposes are being accomplished. God loves us more than anyone on this planet ever has or ever will. If I do need something, He'll get it to me. But some of the things I think I need wouldn't help me at all. And God has something greater in mind. If you live with Him, not attached to the outcome, then you get to enjoy the fullness of His life as it unfolds in yours.

Volume 2, Day 31: How We Honor Others or God[JH]

I had a mentee some time ago who lacked discretion to a very great degree. I mentored her for years. Then one day the Holy Spirit directed me to reply to one of her texts that came at 5:30 am, "Please do not text before 8:00 am unless it is an emergency." I had formerly taken her calls and texts at all hours of the day or night. But God wanted me to get a good night's rest each night because my wife was in great medical distress and needed much personal care from me.

Well, for a few days, this mentee waited until after eight to begin texting. Then, wait for it, ..., 5:32 am "I know that you asked me to wait until after 8 o'clock ... BUT ..." At first I was, to be honest, a bit upset with her. After breakfast, when I had gathered myself and conferred with the Holy Spirit, He guided my thoughts as I made this reply, "Would it be possible for you to **honor** my requests as a token of your appreciation for my commitment to God which causes me to serve you on His behalf? And if you can't do it as a simple courtesy to me, **would you do it out of respect and love for God?**"

She texted back, "I honor you when you say don't text. I guess you think that I don't honor God." For me there was no guessing. She clearly stated that she honored me while totally ignoring my request. She continued, "Do you want me to never text again except on Monday between 5:30 and 6:00am?" She can't see herself honestly!

It just dawned on me that many of us unwittingly do that with God. We think we honor Him by saying we understand and will do what He desires. Then we act contrary to the desire which He has made perfectly clear! Maybe a long, hard look in the mirror would help me see who I really am as opposed to who I want to believe I am.

Volume 2, Day 32: Safety in Numbers? [JH]

In a weekly men's breakfast Bible study last week a brother stood up and said, "I come here every week to have other people reinforce what I believe!" He was as serious as a tooth ache. And some others chimed in with that same sentiment. I cringed when I heard those words!

My thoughts shifted to the scene of the mock trial of Jesus the night before He was crucified. The apparent 'safety in numbers' mentality created a mob of hatred filled religious people. Jesus was being accused of atrocities which He had not committed. He was being called a blasphemer. He was being condemned to death. And this was not just 'any' death. This was the most inhumane of all criminal punishments ever administered by humanity. But, was Jesus truly in the wrong? Absolutely not!

I continued to ponder that the religious leaders of the religion of God's own people, Israel, were the ones who not only reinforce what we believe, but also have been the ones who taught us what we currently believe. Now, to be sure, the Son of God was not a criminal in any way. But, to be sure as well, He did not seek the reinforcement of what He believed from any human gathering, religion or community. And even the Holy Bible itself tells us to challenge fresh truth when we hear it. But the directive is to try to prove it to be true, not prove it to be false. **Jesus' message** was **radical**. But it was **true!**

For some reason, we feel safer following the mob of religious, but self-righteous, people than walking almost alone on the narrow way of Jesus. I strongly suggested to the men there that they seek new truth in these gatherings rather than simply restate the same truths they have believed for decades. Even science takes a **theory** of possible new truth and performs **experiments** to **prove it to be true**.