



**50 DAYS OF
FALLING IN LOVE WITH
JESUS
(AGAIN)**

A 50-DAY DEVOTIONAL

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INTRODUCTION

*The two most difficult things to get straight in life
are love and God. – EUGENE PETERSON¹*

Have you found that there is a constant need to stoke your love for Jesus? Time seems to dull enthusiasm, making once-inspired thinking stale, routine, and matter-of-fact. God can feel distant (a perception, not reality), and like me, you can decide to take matters into our own hands. My personal solution was to throw myself into duty and obligation, taking God for granted, and I even felt “God owed me” something. This kind of thinking and acting, I’ve learned, comes from a heart that has drifted from the love relationship I desperately needed to have with God.

I suspect I’m not alone in this need. It’s too easy in twenty-first century America to feel comfortable in our connection with God. For some of us, it’s the ritual of Sundays; for others, it’s the convenience of having Christian resources whenever we need them. Sometimes, the years of service we’ve given can even keep us from the deeper realization that we do what we do out of our love for God and what He has done for us. We forget it’s a relationship and fall back into the routine or religion.

Nothing could be further from what God desires for you and me in our lives! Jesus died to enable us to have a relationship with God. He wants us to experience His love, grace, and mercy upon our lives. And He wants us to love Him in return, as well. This is the essence of relationship as it was meant to be.

These pages guide you to reengage and reignite your love relationship with Jesus. If He declares that we need to love Him best, then we need to feed that love with the fuel that will help it burn passionately and brightly for Christ. We as a church need to renew our passion for Jesus, too, so that our service to Him is accomplished for the right reasons and for His glory, not our own. These pages coincide with the 8-week sermon series on “Falling in Love with Jesus (Again)” emphasis. An example calendar is online.

Our prayer is your hearts will “burn within you” as you reflect on these Bible passages and devote yourself to reenergizing and renewing your love for Jesus, perhaps in a greater way than ever before.

If you want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way.²

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Symphony of Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: NavPress, 2021), 198.

² Ibid.

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 1 — JEREMIAH 31:3

*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore,
I have continued to extend faithful love to you.*

Real love starts with an understanding of who God is. Contrary to popular opinion, love does not start with you or with me. We must recognize that love is possible because God has revealed Himself to us, and we have experienced a God who loves us beyond our own human comprehension.

Have you been to a wedding lately? If you have, you know that in almost every instance, the bride and groom will declare their faithful love to one another. Did you also know that about half of these marriages will end in divorce? You see, there's a disconnect in our world today over what it means to experience real love.

God sets the standard when He declares to His people that His love is "everlasting." That is, it never fails or stops. It goes on and on and on, as He continues to extend this love to you and me.

The problem is we don't believe it. We can't conceive of anyone who can or will love us, without condition or reservation. People break their promises all the time. How can I trust anyone who says their love is everlasting? Our perception of love on this earth affects our perception of an eternal God who says He will never fail us.

But God's love is different. While it is hard to define, it is not difficult to describe. God's love is faithful, unconditional, and never ending. It is a love borne out of His own nature, and because of that, He continues to extend it to His people, to you and me. He is patient with us.

While this world will say one thing, then turn around and do another, God remains the same. His love is constant. We can count on it, because His declarations and promises are true. The Word of God reminds us God does not lie (Titus 1:2).

So this day, embrace this truth: you are noticed. You are valued. You are precious. You are loved. Unconditionally, for who you are, not for what you do.

Love starts with God. And this will never change.

Thank you, Father, for your everlasting love for me, for "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how He could love me, a sinner condemned, unclean."

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 2 — 1 JOHN 4:19

We love, because He first loved us.

Where does love come from? How did it begin? Most human beings likely believe it originates within our own being, a complex web of scientific chemical reactions to stimuli, specifically in relationships. Many don't even give it a second thought. They assume it's just "part" of being human.

There's certainly something to this; after all, God created us with the capacity to love...it's a part of being made in His image. Unlike other creatures, we have the ability to express love that is deeper, richer, more meaningful and significant than is found in other reproducing organisms.

C. S. Lewis wrote about *The Four Loves* many years ago, and reminded us that all love is not the same kind of love. There is romantic love that moves us from courtship towards commitment. There is familial love that creates an environment for belonging and stability. There is a kind of friendship love that strips away loneliness and gives us strength for the journey. But there is also a fourth type of love—God's love. It is perfect, unconditional and unchanging.

This takes me back to my first question about the origin of love. Here's what we all need to know: love comes from God. He is its source. Specifically, His kind of love, which transcends all others, is the foundation from which true love is experienced and therefore expressed.

This means that our ability to love as He loves us is clearly based on our response to His love for us. To reflect His love means we know Him more intimately and represent Him more accurately.

Many of us are "looking for love in all the wrong places," to use a phrase popularized in a song from my generation. The world's version of love will leave you shallow, empty, and unfulfilled. Look to God for real love and experience it firsthand. Then, you will know and share a love you never knew was possible. His love makes all the difference!

Thank you, Lord, for giving us love that is selfless and sacrificial on our behalf, a love that transcends anything the world has to offer. Help me to reflect this love to you and share it with others, out of the joy our relationship brings to my life.

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 3 — JOHN 3:16

For God loved the world is this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

This is probably the most well-known verse in the entire Bible. At least the New Testament. And at its heart is the love of God. Will you stay with me long enough to try and share a couple of thoughts on this well-known verse that you may have missed before, simply because of its familiarity?

The Authorized Version (King James) of the Bible taught many of us “God loved us so much,” meant He was declaring an “amount” of His love for us to the fullest degree. However, the Christian Standard Version we are using in our devotionals rightly recognizes that this passage actually uses a word to declare God’s love moved Him to action. It literally tells us that He demonstrated His love in sending His Son, Jesus for you and me.

In other words, God was not satisfied with just telling us He loved us; He showed it. Real love does.

And the passage goes on to remind us that God’s demonstration of love in Jesus Christ was a gift to us. Now, I’ve received a lot of gifts in my lifetime, but I’d be hard pressed to declare I ever actually deserved a gift. Why? Because gifts are given freely. I hadn’t earned them. Gifts came into my life out of love from the giver, so that I might experience joy, affirmation, and even celebration. The intent, I believe, was to bless my life and perhaps, make it better.

God’s love led Him to give you His Son. Jesus is God’s ultimate and timeless gift for you. This gift reveal two things to us. First, it shows us the very essence and character of God: God is love. Therefore, everything He does flows out of His loving nature. He is not occasionally loving. From eternity past, to the present and moving towards the future, God is forever loving.

Second, it shows us God’s intention for us: He wants us to be with Him. He values us so much that He has offered us eternal life through His Son. When we believe in Jesus we are ushered into a whole new dimension of life.

He has powerfully demonstrated His love for you. He gave us Jesus. How do you respond to a giver like that?

Thank you, Lord, for showing us the extent of your love in action: the gift of Your Son, my Savior, Jesus Christ, so I can have eternal life. This is what love true is!

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 4 — ROMANS 5:8

But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The world is filled with broken people. That included you and me. All of us are marred, sinful, and if we're being honest, destitute. We were dead—not just ill or disfigured—in our trespasses and sins, according to God's Word (Ephesians 2:1). Deep down inside, we know this about ourselves. In response, often we try hard to prove our worth or validate ourselves before the world. This is a human response to a sinful condition.

But some of us have heard countless times over the years of our lives that we are worthless. No good. Trash. Insignificant, forgotten, and unimportant. The words and the emotions they evoke are real, and they are painful. Sin leaves wounds.

But Jesus came to heal those wounds (Isaiah 53:5). Why? Out of His love for us.

Yesterday we noted that love does; it takes action. For this kind of love to be known, it must be shown. Do you want proof that God loves you? Do you need proof that God loves you? Look no further than Jesus, dying on a Cross in your place, on your behalf. This is eternal evidence of God's love for you.

No longer can you consider yourself worthless, insignificant, or an accident. No longer do you have to work to justify your existence or attempt to convince others, and ourselves, that we matter. Jesus declares for all time that you are worthy of His love and acceptance. He stretched out His arms at Calvary to save us; He continues to stretch out His arms today to embrace us.

Find His love. Accept His love. Trust His love.

That's how much you mean to God. So, stop listening the voices that tell you something else, and start listening to the Only voice that truly matters.

You. Are. Loved.

And that was settled two thousand years ago.

Thank you, Lord, for such "amazing love! How can it be? That You, my God, would die for me." This is all the proof I'll ever need.

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 5 — JOHN 15:13

No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.

There are degrees of love we experience in the world. If we are blessed, we hear the words, “I love you” from someone who matters in our lives. Then, there’s a touch or a gift or a kindness someone does for us: all of these are greater degrees of the love we can share in this world.

But at the top of the list, the ultimate degree in love? To lay down your life for others. John reminds us that Jesus did this for us, His followers. In so doing, He called us His friends, a recognition of affection and relationship reserved for those that transcend simply a work connection. His acknowledgment of friendship conveys relationship that reaches beyond the workplace or the religious sphere to the whole of life. He considers you dear to Him.

Oswald Chambers even suggests that Jesus means more than simply Jesus died for you in “laying down his life.” Rather, His incarnation, as well as His crucifixion and resurrection, were a part of that laying down of life. In fact, every moment He was among us here on earth was a “condescending” of His life on our behalf.

Clearly, though, the ultimate degree of His love was His death for you and for me. Here we see the measure of God’s love for us in His willingness to die on our behalf and in our place. He sacrificed His life for our lives. He prioritized our needs and took upon Himself to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He loves us this much.

Think about that. While military lives given for colleagues on the battlefield are often compared to this, they pale in comparison. For this ultimate, sacrificial love of Christ transcends time, place, affection, and vocation for everyone who puts their faith in Him alone. Only God’s love can do that.

But here’s the bottom line: He has given you and me this love to experience, to live, and to share ourselves in a finite way. We can personify this love daily in any place with any person we meet. Wouldn’t it be an incredible world if we lived out this “greater love” ourselves? Who are your “friends?” How much are you willing to “love” them?

Thank you, Jesus, that you loved me “this much;” help me to live out the finite version of your love in and through my life, if needed, to bring you glory and honor for the gift you’ve freely given me.

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 6 — 1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love - but the greatest of these is love.

Most of us have been to a wedding ceremony where the beautiful passage from 1 Corinthians chapter 13 was included. In my own wedding ceremony, my brother and sister sang an original song incorporating the entire chapter! And yet, this passage was actually not written for weddings or to express the uniqueness of married love. Rather, it was written for the church, and all believers, like you and me.

Paul's great "love chapter" concludes with these fitting words and captures perfectly the undying nature of what love is all about. The love we come to experience because of God transcends the bounds of this world. It is eternal.

The profoundness of this cannot be overstated; did you catch that? The love of God does not end. It does not leave us. It will be our constant companion throughout the age to come. In fact, the love of God becomes a reality to you when one enters a life-giving relationship with Him through Jesus Christ our Lord. Yes, the love God gives lasts forever. But the love of God is available to you now, every moment of every day.

Paul, though, means more than love simply lasts forever. He is also declaring this love God gives is constant; it remains. Along with faith and hope, it abides in this world, and the age to come, through thick and thin, good times and bad. Never does it flag. Never does it fail us. Never will it abandon us, neglect us, or forget us.

Faith anchors our relationship in Him. Hope anticipates all we have yet to experience in Him. But love provides the constant reminder of provision found in Him. Someone has said it this way: faith started our relationship with God, hope is found in the relationship yet to be in days ahead, but love...it is our constant companion in every moment of life today. And today is truly all we ever have.

But when we have His love, we have Him, for it is His nature. Its greatness is found in Him.

*Thank you, Lord, for your unfailing and constant love, in every moment of every day.
May I relish it and rejoice in it as I celebrate this eternal gift in my life.*

WEEK ONE: UNDERSTANDING LOVE

DAY 7 — ROMANS 8:38-39

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Love is not a feeling.

Feelings come and go. In my life, they change far more often than my clothes. And their intensity can vary more than the meal of the day. As volatile as the day is long, feelings can trick us into a perception of reality that is literally far from the truth. If feelings are our monitor, then our moments and the meaning of such will fluctuate like the fuel gauge in our vehicle. We will often feel we are running on empty.

This passage of Scripture steers us clear of basing our love and the love we experience from others, especially God, on feelings.

Feelings are fed by circumstances. So, when Paul mentions affliction, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, and sword in verse 35, the feelings-based interpretation of love would say God has abandoned us, and that He doesn't care. But Paul declares just the opposite! None of these things keep us from God's love. Rather, the apostle proclaims we are great conquerors instead, through Jesus who loved us.

Why? Because real love is found in the nature of God, not in our feelings. It may or may not be "warm and fuzzy," but it is most assuredly "constant and continuing." It is seen in the commitment of Christ for you and me, for He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Love is God's heart language. This never changes. And you can never be separated from this genuine, sacrificial, selfless, unconditional love, if you are in Christ Jesus. So, don't evaluate your circumstances as evidence of God's love; rather, experience the evidence of God's love in your circumstances. You'll understand Him, and your life, in a whole new way.

Thank you, Father, for this incredible love that will never leave me! Even if I don't feel it, I know your love is inviting me to experience more and more of you in the moments of my life. Help me not to fear, but to trust your love to make me more than a conqueror in Christ.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 8 — DEUTERONOMY 6:5

Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

The first and greatest command. That's what Jesus called it, this passage from the Law of Moses. And that says a lot, if you think about it.

There are 613 laws given in the Old Testament; Jesus declared this one is at the top of the list. *Numero Uno*. Most important of all.

More important than evangelism.

More important than prayer.

More important than discipleship.

More important than obedience.

More important than worship.

Why? Because if our heart is right with God, all of these things, and everything else, will fall in line as it should. And if not, well, anyone can go through the motions and not have the right motivation, the right heart attitude, prompting it.

Just think about the Pharisees, leaders who claimed to keep all the laws, but looked down on everyone else. Or consider the Sadducees, who went through the motions of religion without any hint of genuine spirituality. Or even the disciples, who claimed allegiance to follow Christ, but ran and hid when Jesus was arrested. And what about the Corinthian church, who gathered for worship, but looked down on others as inferior because of their gifting?

No, love trumps them all. Because when you have love, the rest follows. And if it doesn't, at least you have a heart that wants to make it right with the one wronged. Repentance is an eager response from a heart loving Jesus as it should.

While the solution is simple, it's not easy.

It's an every moment of every day decision that you and I make, this loving God more than anyone or anything else. And our flesh gets in the way, because we are selfish. But here's the deal: when we love God as we should, everything else follows. Everything.

Thank you, Lord, for your unfailing love. Help me put my love for you first in my life each and every day.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 9 — LEVITICUS 19:18

...love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

While love for God emphatically comes first, Jesus connects this second command to the previous command. In fact, He declares they are so interconnected that you can't love God if you don't love your neighbor as yourself. Let me say that again: you can't love God as you should, unless you love your neighbor as you should. That means, loving:

- the one who lives next door
- the colleague who works beside you
- the driver who aggressively passes you on the road
- the family member who always irritates you
- the stranger who is totally different from you ethnically, linguistically, politically, religiously, and socio-economically

And not only are we to love them (as Christ would); we are to love them as we love ourselves. With priority. With esteem and value. With dignity and importance. With attention and care.

God puts His signature on this command; it's that important. In fact, Jesus reminds us how important it is in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), where he emphasizes our compassion and concern for others must indeed transcend the cultural constructs that seek to divide us. We are to look beyond these elements that separate and divide others in society into "haves" and "have nots." We are to see people and respond as God does: with unconditional, sacrificial, unselfish love for them as His creation.

This is not an afterthought or a priority to easily discard. A part of our calling from God is to actively engage with others around us, particularly those in need, those who are far from God, and those who are often seen as unlovable. We are to show Christ to them through the lives that we live. That starts with love.

If you're having difficulty loving your neighbor, or find yourself apathetic and complacent when you know you ought to care, then start by praying for them as they are, and for your own heart, that God will give you a love that transcends your differences and concerns.

Father, thank you for the privilege of loving my neighbors. Help me to love them as I should, showing the light of Christ to them in and through my life.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 10 — GALATIANS 5:14

For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Yesterday we focused on the more obvious part of this command: to love our neighbor. But there is an addendum to this “second” great command: as [you love] yourself. In fact, in every mention of this command in the New Testament, these words are included. They are not a mistake. Not an afterthought. Not unimportant. Not unnecessary.

Jesus reminds us that we are to have a proper love for our own self. In fact, He suggests it will motivate us to love our neighbor the way we should. The verb used for love goes with the entirety of the remainder of the sentence, meaning, if we are to love our neighbor as we should, as God loves them, we are also to love ourselves, as God loves us.

You and I are created in His image. When He saw man and woman in the Garden of Eden He remarked it was “very good.” He values us as the crown of His creation.

You and I are redeemed by the blood of His Son. When we repent and believe the Gospel, we are restored to the precious, intimate nature of this relationship with Him. He paid the price for your redemption.

You and I are indwelt by His Spirit. We are the Temple of God now. He equips us, empowers us, and never, ever will leave us. He is your eternal companion.

God calls you His “treasure,” as well. Your worth is beyond measure!

I remind you of all this to say two important truths today: first, there is no room for self-loathing in the Kingdom of God. If I can use a cliché: God doesn’t create any junk. Any self-doubts, self-hatred, low self-esteem, etc., is not the result of what God has said about you, but rather the Enemy who wants to steal your soul.

Second, there is no room for any pride and self-righteousness, either. Your “best self” is God’s doing, not your own. He created you with vast potential and ability. He truly expects you to work out what He’s worked in.

Humility and gratitude are the only right responses to God’s overflowing love toward you. So, live it, and give your best self to others, even as you take the best care of your own self.

God, thank you for creating me with significance and worth. Enable me to see this and value this as you do, for this will truly impact my ability to love my neighbor as I should.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 11 — JOHN 13:34-35

I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

There are many different “one another” commands in the New Testament: accept one another, bear one another’s burdens, show hospitality to one another, forgive one another. There are additional ones, as well. But none of these commands come close in number to the command Jesus gives His disciples in the Upper Room. “Love one another” is mentioned at least nine times (some say thirteen!), a resounding emphasis on the importance and priority of this “one another” command. In fact, some people suggest this command encompasses all the other “one another” commands within it. If we love each other as we should, we will forgive, bear other’s burdens, accept them as they are, etc.

Note that this love is directed toward fellow followers of Christ, not simply the neighbors around us. We are to love each other as siblings in God’s family and love them well. This is so critical that Jesus mentions it three times in these two verses!

This is not an afterthought. Rather, this is central to the teachings of Christ. We must love one another.

Can I state the obvious? In many churches, especially struggling, declining ones, the congregation has often become a place where we tolerate one another rather than love one another. We hold grudges, we are bitter, resentful, or envious; we criticize, complain, and bicker instead. This must stop among God’s family.

In Ephesians 4:3-4, Paul reminds us that, among other things, we are to bear with one another in love. In so doing he suggests we are keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. The opposite seems to also be true: if we are not loving one another as we should, in good times or bad, with pleasant people or more difficult people, then we are fracturing the unity of the Spirit.

How do I love fellow believers as I should? Start by praying for them, but also by having a kind, compassionate heart toward them. And small acts of kindness and love, like an encouraging word or a ‘thank you,’ can go a long way toward the love we all need to share.

Father, help me to love my fellow believers: listening, caring, serving them as I should. After all, you have loved me, so that I have the power to do this, as you enable me.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 12 — LUKE 6:27-28

But I say to you who listen: Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Love God. Love my neighbor. Love yourself. Love one another. I get that. But love my enemies?! Really???

Outrageous, isn't it? This counter-cultural lifestyle Jesus expects is foreign to our thinking, but also foreign to our hearts. Hear me now: if you are determined to hold on to the hurt others cause you, then you will never be able to love anyone the way Jesus says we should. We must let our hurt and pain go. We must let Jesus heal it. Only then can we love as we should.

Jesus knew this, of course. But He wants you and I to know it, too...not just in our mind, but in our hearts. I learned a long time ago that "hurting people hurt people." A majority of the time in my life, the experience of hate or anger or mistreatment to me really had nothing to do with me, at all. Something else had lit their fuse, probably something not yet dealt with properly in their own life experience.

And while there may be legitimate hatred or mistreatment, including cursing that comes your way, we must always remember our true Enemy is behind it, not the people who confront us. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against...powers of darkness," the apostle Paul says. (Ephesians 6:12)

Love trumps hurtfulness with helpfulness. It replaces reactivity with pro-activity. Love responds with kindness and concern. It can, in fact, bring healing to others through compassion and forgiveness.

Moreover, love frees us ourselves from the bondage of hate, anger, bitterness, and the need for revenge. Love liberates. Love celebrates. Love keeps no record of being wronged (1 Corinthians 13:5). When you prioritize love as Jesus did, you too will one day pray, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." And you can trust God to take care of all the rest.

Father, give me the grace to love my enemies as you loved yours on earth. Free me from the shackles of revenge and hatred through the healing power of your love working in me.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 13 — COLOSSIANS 3:14

Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

If you ever wonder about what's most important in the life of God's people, you need to look at passages of Scripture like this one. The apostle Paul has highlighted the primacy of love in the life of the Christ-follower above the fellow-virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness...a formidable list indeed! And he tells us why: it is, in his words, "the perfect bond of unity."

Bonding agents in our world are notable for the way they enable separate elements to hold together. Paul is noting the same of this thing we call love; It glues us to one another! In so doing it enables us to experience unity. Likely, the apostle is talking about a relational, familial unity that gives us a sense of belonging, community, and connectedness. Love reminds us we are never alone, but a part of something far bigger, the family of God.

Its primacy is significant. Love does what all other items mentioned can't: it transcends differences, it covers a multitude of sins, it enables us to live out our potential with the support and encouragement of others, it prohibits envy, selfishness, and duplicity. It is perfect in all these ways.

But you and I have to "put on" this love. Paul is literally suggesting we must clothe ourselves in it. Love is to be the garment we wear before God and the world. It is to be seen by others.

So today, make love the most important thing you put on. And as you are mindful of the importance of His love in your life, wear it well. Wear it proudly. Wear it purposefully. And in so doing, let His love shine through!

LORD, we are grateful for the gift of your love, and the ability we have, not only to receive it, but to give it...to live it. Help us make it the primary goal in our growth and development as followers of Christ, for your glory and our good.

WEEK TWO: PRIORITIZING LOVE

DAY 14 — EPHESIANS 3:17-18

...I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love...

Paul's second great prayer in the letter to the church in Ephesus is filled with the importance of love in the lives of believers. This prayer mentions love several times, noting its importance in our growing, developing ministry as the Body of Christ. For us to live and serve as we should, love must grow. It must thrive.

How rooted are we in the love of God? Do we recognize His movement among us? Do we acknowledge His work among us, the unity He brings, the oneness we share? Are we firmly established in this love, or are we neglecting or abandoning it? Remember, this is the same church Jesus speaks to in the book of Revelation, saying they had left their first and primary love for Him behind. It's easy for this to happen, when we let other things of interest take precedence over our love of God.

This subtle, potential shift is countered in Paul's prayer by a growing awareness of the comprehensive and inexhaustible nature of God's love. We can't outgrow this love, both our need for it and our responsibility to share it. When we value it, we spend more time with God, hearing what He has to say to us in His Word, and sharing with Him the desires of our heart in prayer. When we treasure it, we will want to share it with others who need to know and experience it. Moreover, we will be constantly serving others, even sacrificially, never tiring of the ways we can show the love of God to those who need to receive it.

The inexhaustible nature of God's love is something every church needs to embrace and celebrate. The more love you give, the more you receive. The deeper you grow, the stronger you are. The priority you place on the love of God, the more you experience the God of love.

This is why Paul's prayers focus on our character, not our activity or our health. Christ in you is the hope of glory. And what's in you is what the world sees of the God who makes it all possible. He wants them to experience this love, too, you know. The key is found in more of Jesus and less of you and me.

Father, help my love to grow beyond anything I have ever experienced or imagined. May I never be satisfied with only the love of God I have right now. Give me more, I pray.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 15 — HOSEA 3:4b,6

Your love is like the morning mist and like the early dew that vanishes...For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Adultery is an ugly word. Especially for Christians. We are called to faithful lives with our spouses, and this translates into a faithful witness before our families and the world at large. We need to remember the vows we made at our wedding ceremony: to love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and health, in good times and bad, in riches or poverty. Reflecting on them regularly not only keeps us faithful; it makes us grateful. Truly one of God's greatest gifts to you and me is the spouse we have been given. He or she is a gift from the Lord! We should act accordingly.

Hosea the prophet is a living parable of God's faithfulness to us, even when we have been unfaithful to Him. "Unfaithful?" you say. "I haven't been unfaithful!" Hear me when I say, there is more than one way to be unfaithful to your spouse. While you may not physically betray your significant other, your heart can easily stray and replace that love with the love for another (person OR thing).

Churches do this, too. If we're not careful, we can "abandon our first (primary) love" for Jesus Christ. We can replace our love for Christ with love for our facilities, our bank accounts, our activities, or our possessions. We can even begin to think we're responsible for the blessings we have received. Our hearts can drift, and when they do, like the people in Hosea's day, we substitute cheap imitations for the genuine, faithful love God rightly desires and expectantly desires. Our adultery (unfaithfulness to God) leads to idolatry (substitutes for God). This is a grievous sin.

It happens all the time in struggling churches. Our calendar dictates our actions, not our heart. Our duty replaces our affection, even in worship. Our numbers become more important than the One who grants us life. Our orthodoxy supplants our Redeemer.

Remember! Jesus calls us back to the basics, the foundation of what has made all of salvation and eternal life possible. And that is Him. Remember, and let your love flow again!

Jesus, thank you for the love you have shown me. May I remember to love you like no other.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 16 — EPHESIANS 2:4

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive in Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You have been saved by grace!

“But God.” These are two of the greatest words ever penned in the human language. Everything in life reminds us of our humanity, our limitations, our struggles, and our brokenness. And if we’re being truly honest, life constantly reminds us of our sin. In spite of the great love God has for us, we have fallen short of the mark He sets for you and for me. In fact, the passage today emphasizes the fact that we were dead (not just sick, disfigured, or spiritually challenged) in our sins. We’ve transgressed God’s commands and trespassed places where we should never be found. And when you’re dead, there’s absolutely nothing you can do to restore life. It’s too late for you and me.

“But God.” Aren’t you glad these words exist? We are reminded that, while there was nothing we could do for our own deceased condition, God made us alive...in Christ! He could and did what we could never do for ourselves. He saved us from our sins. From death. From self. For all eternity. It is an act of His grace.

Why would He do that? I mean, we don’t deserve it; we certainly haven’t earned it. In fact we resist it and even try to find alternative ways to solve this deep and eternal need in our lives. Each of us is as wayward and selfishly rebellious as the Prodigal Son; we want to do things our own way on our own terms.

How’s that working for you?

“But God.” In this verse we are reminded of two more great realities about God. He is rich in mercy. He is so very willing to withhold from us what our sin and trespasses truly deserve. The overabundance of His mercy is a part of His character He wants us to experience. He doesn’t leave us in our fatal condition, pronounced dead on arrival. Second, the apostle declares God does this because of His great love for us. Wow! What a great love it truly is, that He would resurrect us to new life in Christ. Incredible! Do you remember?

Father, you are so amazing! You extend mercy, love, and grace to me beyond measure, in ways I will never deserve. I am humbled and I am grateful. Help me to remember the price Christ willingly paid for me to resurrect me to new life for all eternity.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 17 — PSALM 136:1

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good. His faithful love endures forever.

There are many places in the Psalms where we are told of God's goodness. (Psalms 100, 106, 107, and 118, immediately come to mind.) Certainly, He has done good things for us; He has made a difference in our lives. But the Psalmist reminds us that God is not only good for what He does, but because of who He is. His character and nature in each of these instances are reminders to give thanks to the LORD for this reality.

Gratitude is to be the hallmark of a loved and rescued life. And the Psalmist calls us to this response. Twenty-six times he has us declare "His faithful love endures forever." If that's not a call to remembrance, I don't know what is! Let's look at this a little more closely.

The repetitive nature of this refrain was likely used originally in Temple worship. The leaders would declare a great fact about who God is and/or what He had done. The congregation of people would respond the same way every time: "His faithful love endures forever." The recognition of who He is, King of kings, Lord of lords, etc. is to help us remember both His sovereignty and His transcendence over everything. He sees it all, knows it all, and is in control of it all. And in the midst of it all, we are to remember "His faithful love endures forever."

The chronicling of history in the remainder of the chapter is to call us to remember that God, in our good times and in our bad times, has been there for us. He has never failed. Though the obstacles seem great at times, God has always provided. Many times He has done something miraculous, something only He could do. We need to remember this, no matter what we are currently going through in life.

Finally, this "faithful love" is well-known as one of the richest words in the Hebrew language (*hesed*). It can also be translated "lovingkindness" or "mercy," because it so full-bodied it represents so much more about the character of God than any one word can express. Do you get it? God's faithful love is kind, merciful, and enduring through all-time for you and me. That's something we need to remember every day for the rest of our lives.

Lord, thank you for such faithful love shown toward us! We see it and experience it, because we are in relationship with you, and it is your nature. We are humbled and grateful.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 18 — ISAIAH 29:13

These people approach me with their speeches to honor me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me, and human rules direct their worship of me.

The prophet Isaiah is in a long discourse, proclaiming judgment on the nations and peoples in the ancient Middle East. This passage actually is in the middle of a prophetic word against Jerusalem, God's own people. These people should have known better than to ignore the God who provided for their every need, right? He had chosen them, redeemed them, and loved them in spite of their bitter and endless complaints. Time and again, He had delivered them from the hand of oppression and even saved them from themselves.

However, this passage foretells the coming judgment on Judah that will usher them into exile because....get this, God loves them.

What?!

Those He loves, the Scripture says, He will discipline (Hebrews 12:6). The complaint? They are only going through the motions of worship and prefer their human "rules" or traditions to the words of God. They have, in effect, replaced God with themselves as arbiters in life and worship, and do as they please, even in worship. They gather not for God but for self, for "their hearts are far from me." They have forgotten what they are called to remember!

But back to the discipline...God cares enough, He loves us enough, to reel us in. He calls us back to Himself, for He doesn't want to destroy us, but to correct and refine us for the days ahead. The desire is that His discipline will bring us closer to Him and we will grow to be more like Him in the process. But the discipline is sometimes needed, so that we will remember "we are not our own; we have been bought with a price." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Sometimes our church goes through a rough patch. Perhaps we have gotten used to doing things the way we want, rather than what God requires. Our traditions trump His directives. This is sad, but true. And in these seasons, God reaches out even in His discipline to get us back where we belong. We must remember we are His. His attention to us is a result of His love. Our Father always knows best.

Thank you, Father, for keeping your eye on us, and earnestly desiring to remind us of your life-giving, always superior love. Correct us out of that love, and keep us close by your side.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 19 — 1 JOHN 3:1

See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children — and we are!

The message of John's first letter focuses on assurance of our salvation. And among the many things the apostle says is that the love of God experienced and seen in our own lives is at the top of that list. We need to remember this.

If you're like me, you have times when doubts or concerns about your relationship with God occupy your mind (Am I really saved? Why don't I hear from God? Why is sin still a hurdle in my life?, etc.). In such times I have a tendency to think if I just work harder and do more, than it will make me feel alright...it will assure me of my salvation. This typical response is diametrically opposed to what God says. We didn't work to earn our salvation; we don't work to keep our salvation.

The apostle reminds us the key is not in our efforts (a "works" theology), but in God's love. Time and again in this letter, John writes of God and His love for you and me. In this passage, he calls us to remember this love that enables us to be children of God! His family! His own!

Not a servant or a slave, but a child.

The last time I checked, being a child was the result of relationship, not work. You don't earn this, you are born (anew) into it. It's not based on what you do, but what He has done in Jesus Christ.

So, today as you live your life, remember and be thankful that God adopted you into His family. You are a child of God. You belong to Him. And not only is there nothing you can do to earn this; there is nothing you can do to change this truth.

Now that's great love for you and for me!

Thank you, Father, for exhibiting such great love to me. I am grateful to be a part of your family. Help me remember to love you and my siblings as I should.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 20 — 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3

We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

What motivates you in life? Why do you do what you do? Early in life, most of us responded to outside influences, like parents and teachers, as motivators in our behavior. They taught us and showed us what to do, including the need for boundaries to protect us from harming ourselves and others. Punishment was an initial motivator; reward was not far behind.

As we matured, I hope you and I discovered there are better and more powerful motivators in life. Love is at the top of this list. In fact, Paul states emphatically that the labor of the Thessalonians, their hard, strenuous work in ministry, was borne out of love. Not fear. Not reward. But love.

We need to remember this ourselves, for motives cloud our judgment and, if we're not careful, can lead us to manipulate others for our own intent. Our hearts need to stay pure, our motives blameless, and our behavior lived out with integrity. This honors God and brings Him glory.

Ministry can be done out of a variety of motivations. We can teach our Sunday School class to challenge the pastor's viewpoint. We can share the Gospel with another to get "a notch on our belt." We can be charitable to the church to receive applause from others. And we can be hospitable to those in need so they will "owe" us. Selfish ambition can blind us to the prompting of our own hearts.

But love reflects God in our own lives. When we love sacrificially, unselfishly in service to God and others, people see the Father in us. When we do, our hearts remain pure in our motives and our deeds.

Serve out of love; everything else falls short.

Thank you, Father, for godly examples and the reminder to serve you and others out of the love we have been given and experienced in our own lives.

WEEK THREE: REMEMBERING LOVE

DAY 21 — PSALMS 103:2

My soul, bless the LORD, and do not forget all his benefits.

David is a master at calling us to remember God. Countless times in these songs, he rehearses God's mighty acts for us. There are the historical items, where he brings to mind the ways the Almighty provided for us when obstacles appeared insurmountable...often with miraculous signs of His power. Sometimes he hearkens us to reflect on the beauty and wonder of creation, as it displays the work of God on display for all to see. Here in this passage, he reminds us of God's sovereign and comforting presence in the personal experiences of our daily lives.

God forgives our sin, full stop. Nothing is a more significant "benefit" than this, for it is eternal in nature. To deal with our iniquity and its subsequent consequences like guilt and shame, God has granted us unmerited and undeserved forgiveness. This is only possible through the death of His Son, our Savior Jesus, on the cross for you and me.

He heals all our diseases. The Psalmist is not saying that all who are sick will be healed by God. He is saying that all who are healed can trace it back to God. In other words, our sustained health and any recovery we may experience is a direct result of God's hand on us. He gives us doctors and medicines, with the wisdom and strength to enable us to heal.

He redeems your life from death (the Pit, the grave). He has paid the price through Jesus our Lord to enable us to be conquerors over death; it is not the end nor does it have the final say over our lives. "Death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

He crowns you with His love, mercy, and compassion. He blesses us with the priceless intangibles of life, like these. These are the "crowning work" of God upon our lives, giving us relationships, freedom, and concerns in the on-going experiences of life.

He satisfies you with good things. He is the provider of all we need. He withholds no good thing from you and me. His blessings can satisfy and fulfill us, if we allow.

As a result, you and I should soar above our concerns and troubles in life, because God knows what He's doing. He is always watching, always knowing, always caring, always providing everything we need. You can trust Him. You can trust Him today.

Precious Father, may I be grateful as I reflect on the blessings You have brought to my life.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 22 — PSALMS 51:2-3

Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.

Forgiveness is predicated on repentance. It doesn't happen any other way. We must acknowledge our guilt before God and ask Him to cleanse us. Only He can do this; He alone is God.

Many have tried to explain away our sin...they are seen as simply limitations or weaknesses; they are the result of bad parenting or our environment; they are the tools of religion to control people through guilt and shame. All these and other rationalizations fall short of getting to the core of our human problem. They secularize the concern, and in turn blame our Creator for our own weaknesses.

Others have tried ways to atone for sin...they try hard to tip the scales of goodness in their favor; they live moral lives, devoid of God, but built on principles of dignity, honor, and respect; they tolerate the differences of others, claiming no basis for judging their behavior; they proclaim healthy self-image overcomes the crippling affects that religion has done to the lives around them.

But God is very, very clear on this: sin has separated us from Him. "Your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not listen." (Isaiah 59:2)

Without acknowledging our sin, we live in denial. We marginalize our wrongdoing. We rationalize the liberties we take with God's commands. We claim we are victims, instead of instigators, of our own rebellion.

There is no forgiveness without repentance, and there is no repentance without us owning our own sin. Someone has noted that in the English language "I" is at the center of SIN. I want my way; you do, too. But this will never allow us to follow Jesus. For that to happen in your life and mine, we must repent of our sin. Only then do find the forgiveness that is needed for us to follow Jesus as we should.

Are you willing to own your sin, like David did so honestly in our passage for today? Are you willing to ask God for forgiveness? No renewal of relationship with God is possible in your life or mine, without it.

Father, I acknowledge my sin to you today. Forgive me and wash me whiter than snow.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 23 — ROMANS 3:10-23

...as it is written, There is no one righteous, not even one...For all has sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

You're a sinner. So am I. This is likely not a new revelation to you; it's certainly not to me. Even if you have never read this in the sacred Scripture, your soul has declared this truth to you at some point. We all, including you and me, have fallen short of God's expectations and what He requires. Someone once said, "It only takes a single sin to make you a sinner."

The apostle Paul makes this universal, timeless declaration in the letter he writes to the church at Rome. He leans into David, the Psalmist, for the quote at the beginning of the passage, but boldly declares this reality himself in verse 23, so there is no misunderstanding. Paul stands by this claim. In chapter seven, he even goes so far as to remind us that as followers of Jesus we still grapple with sin in our own lives, though we have committed our lives to Christ. Temptation to sin is a constant, moment-by-moment battle to submit to the leadership of our Lord or be drawn away by the enemy of our soul.

So what do we do about it? This week is clearly about self-awareness and acknowledgement of our on-going need for what the Bible calls "sanctification." This is the continual, progressive work of salvation in your life and mine. Obviously, God desires that we allow His Spirit to grow us through this process to become more and more like Jesus. But this all starts with a reality check: we are sinners that will always and in every moment need a Savior. We never outgrow this reality.

In God's wise plan, He created the church (yes, it was His idea! see Matthew 16:18) for redeemed broken people, who are growing together to be more like Jesus, even while they are on mission for Jesus. This means the residue of sin and the stains it creates in our lives affect each of us constantly.

But thanks be to God! He gives us who are believers and followers of Christ the ability to overcome sin through the loving, finished work of Jesus on the cross and the on-going presence of the Spirit in our lives, who enables us to overcome temptation. Jesus paid it all, so we no longer receive the penalty of our sin (condemnation and hell). Rather, we experience the power of His forgiveness every day, as we repent (turn away) from our sin.

Father, I thank you for what Jesus has done for me. I repent of my own every day sin, and ask you to forgive me. I run back into Your welcoming arms today.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 24 — MARK 1:15

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!

This is the first message of Jesus, recorded in the Gospel of Mark. These two short sentences foreshadow His entire ministry on earth.

Jesus came at the right time. God's time. His arrival on earth was no accident; it was foretold. It was anticipated. It was accomplished. And God is always on time for you, too. While His time may not be when you prefer, He knows what He's doing. You can trust Him. He has a plan and a purpose, and it is for His glory and your good.

The Kingdom of God is the overarching theme of the Bible. Jesus spoke of it more than just about anything else He mentioned. Over a hundred times He reminds us that the Kingdom is the ultimate objective for God's people. The church—your church—is here to serve Him and His kingdom. Because this Kingdom is not a “geographic location,” it is near to you and me. Because of God's presence, His power, and His plan, it is at work in and through us. Will you serve in the Kingdom today?

These two truths call upon us to respond with our love and allegiance to our Lord. The first response needed is to repent. The word literally means “to change one's mind.” Changing one's mind about God's work among us and His kingdom priority for His people means putting Christ first in our lives. It means trusting His timing and that He knows what He's doing. It means surrendering our schedule and our agenda for His own. It means turning away from our personal self-interest and turning around to experience more of God instead.

The second response needed is to believe the Good News. Good News = the gospel. It is the message of God's love for you and me that brought Jesus to earth to die on the Cross for us. When you believe the good news that Jesus alone died to forgive your sins and redeem your life, it changes everything! It brings peace and promise, love and eternal life...and so much more! It truly is Good News for you and for me.

So today, make sure repentance and belief are cornerstones in your life and service for our King. It makes every day worth living, for it gives every day Someone worth living for.

Jesus, today I acknowledge my need to live in repentance and belief of all you have made possible. Help me to embrace the wonder of a forgiven life and celebrate your Good News!

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 25 — MATTHEW 19:16-22

Jesus said to him, Go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

A quick question today: Is there anything you love more than Jesus? If we're honest with ourselves, there are certainly things that challenge our love and allegiance to Him. It could be family. Children and grandchildren are very high on my list, and I suspect on yours, too. In addition, there's our spouse, our work, our bank accounts, our health. The list could go on and on. It is okay for these to challenge our allegiance to Jesus; they just can't control us or command our allegiance over Jesus.

This was the problem with the man we call the "rich young ruler," seen in the passage for today. While living a good moral life, he was unwilling to relinquish his love for possessions to the leadership of Jesus Himself. Essentially, it was the only thing standing between him and eternal life. But it was enough for him to walk away from Jesus instead of following Jesus.

That decision—to put something else above Jesus—can have eternal consequences.

And as for this life, the Bible has a word for such allegiance and love for anything more than God Himself: it is called "idolatry." When you hear that word in the twenty-first century, don't think "little wooden or metal totem." Rather think, what owns my heart? You see, God feels so strongly about this for you and me that He warns us against idolatry at the very beginning of the Ten Commandments. Our allegiance to God must be foundational to everything else in the Christian life. He has to come first.

By the way, that good moral life the young man was living, it had deceived him into thinking he was in a good place with God. But morality will never make you good enough. Only forgiveness of your sins by Jesus Himself will do that. And that takes repentance.

So today, when Jesus says to you, "Follow Me," (and He will!), then repent of what's holding you back, abandon what you're holding on to, and follow Him who you're holding out for.

Thank you Lord for the call to let other things fall in place under my allegiance, love, and submission to You. I will not walk away from you but with You, step by step, into the future.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 26 — 1 JOHN 1:9-10

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This reminder is a welcome oasis in a sea of despair.

God wants us to experience forgiveness; He wants to unburden our soul. And as the apostle John writes to his readers, likely the church at Ephesus, he gives them this welcome news. Even though we still sin, God is eager to forgive us and cleanse us from its stain.

This is an important reminder for Christ-followers, for while sin should be less frequent as we mature in Christ, it is still a reality. In fact, John goes on in verse 10 to tell us that those who say they don't sin anymore are liars! But the overarching reality for us to grasp is this: forgiveness is available to you and me, if we confess our sins to Him.

Confession is the gateway to repentance. When we admit or acknowledge to God our sins, we are agreeing with Him about what He already knows to be true: our sins are not His will and they come between us in our relationship with Him. To keep this relationship clean with our loving and gracious Father, we should be eager to confess our sins to Him.

Eager? By all means, yes! Our God does not sit, waiting to pounce on us or shame us when we acknowledge our sins to Him. Rather, He wants to forgive us when we admit them to Him, repenting and asking His forgiveness for our wrongs. He is eager to forgive, so we should be even more eager to confess!

Did you notice that the reason He forgives has nothing to do with who you are or what you are able to do? Rather, it is based on His character as a faithful and righteous God. He cannot lie and He does not break His promises. He always does what is right and just. These things never change, not with you or with me...no matter what the sin, how big or how small.

Why not confess your sins to Him today? Or even better, every day? Make sure your heart is clean and forgiven as you live the day ahead for Him. There's no need to carry unnecessary burdens forward, even another day. You will be glad you did!

Lord God, you are faithful and true. I confess to you my sins and ask your forgiveness. Cleanse me and make me new, as I live for you today.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 27 — 1 PETER 3:18

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God.

A famous pastor in years past said, “Grace may be free, but it isn’t cheap.” Allow me to paraphrase that saying today with this similar thought: forgiveness may be free, but it isn’t cheap, either. The price? The death of Jesus on the cross for you and me.

If we’re not careful, we may take for granted these realities. First, we can fail to appreciate the extent of the work of Christ on the cross. This passage tells us three very important truths: He suffered for you, He did it “once for all,” and He is righteous. Let’s think about these realities.

The death of Jesus was a horrible, excruciating experience for our Savior. His suffering was real, and it was immense. He did not have to do this, and He did not deserve it. Rather, He was willing to do this out of His love for you. You matter than much to Him.

Second, His experience on the cross paid the full debt needed for sins. It will never have to be repeated...ever. It is done; completed; finished! Christ did everything necessary for us to be forgiven and redeemed, if we commit our life to Him. Among other things, this means that you and I cannot add or influence or convince Him to forgive our sins any other way. No amount of good works or family status or celebrity role will make this right: only the blood of Jesus shed for you.

Finally, Jesus is righteous. We are not. He took our place on the cross, for we were the ones who deserved to die for our sins. He became your substitute, because He loves you. He did for you what you and I could not do for ourselves. His righteousness atoned for us.

Why would He do this? The passage says it as clearly as anywhere in the Scripture: He did it to bring you to God. If that’s not love, what is?! “Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.”

Thank you Jesus, for such amazing, eternal life-giving love for me! May I not take for granted your suffering, your sufficiency, and your substitution on my behalf. Help me to live a repentant, forgiven life to your glory this day.

WEEK FOUR: REPENTING OF ABANDONED LOVE

DAY 28 — LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23

*Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

This memorable and encouraging passage is located in one of the saddest books in the Bible, known as the Lamentations of Jeremiah (or just Lamentations, for short). Jeremiah, the author, was known as the “weeping prophet.” His ministry was to the obstinate and rebellious people of Judah; in fact, God even told him that his words would be met with derision, persecution, and no success. Yet he faithfully proclaimed God’s messages in the book of Jeremiah. Here in his second book, he gives a poignant, heart-breaking proclamation of God’s judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of His people.

In the midst of this dismal report, there is an overarching theme that you cannot afford to miss: God keeps His promises. Whether good or bad, God’s Word reigns supreme. It does not fail, it is not altered. God does what He declares He will do.

This can be good news, if we are repentant and seeking God’s forgiveness. Then, God promises He will forgive us and remember our sin no more! But if we are not repentant, the opposite is true: we remain under His judgment, and He will hold us accountable for our sin, for it is rebellion against Him.

With this theme in mind and judgment all around, Jeremiah issues a breath of fresh air: God’s faithful love (*hesed*) extends to us today. The mercies He bestows on us are new every morning! So, each day you and I get a fresh chance to experience His love, grace, mercy, compassion, and faithfulness anew. That includes today!

Instead of taking our lives, He gives us renewed life. Instead of perishing, we are protected. Instead of unending fury, we discover unending faithfulness. Instead of relentless pain, we find everlasting provision.

Now, that’s love! Even when we are unlovable, God loves us. His mercies never end. Because of this eternal reality, we owe it to ourselves to leave our sin behind and run quickly into the merciful arms of Jesus.

Thank you, LORD, for your faithfulness to me, even when I have not deserved it. I leave my sin behind and run into your welcoming and forgiving arms.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 29 — 2 CHRONICLES 7:14

...and [if] my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

This week we are looking at passages in the Bible that tell us God sees us as a part of a community of faith, His people. We call this the “church” today, because of Jesus. (You can read about this in Matthew 16:18, if you desire.) The important thing for us to grasp this week is that we as the people of God collectively fail to do what God commands, too. When we do, He holds us accountable, even if individually we weren’t specifically at fault.

Here King Solomon, the son of David, is in the midst of a prayer with God, in which he recognizes four things we as God’s people need to do to be right with Him.

We must humble ourselves. God starts this recipe for repentance with a key ingredient: humility. When we humble ourselves, we choose to think of ourselves less, putting others first, and deferring to them as more important. The opposite is pride, arrogance, and selfishness. In this verse, God is telling His people to recognize His sovereignty over us and His right to command us to obey His Word and follow His ways. Anything less is rebellion.

We must pray. We must communicate with God. This is impossible to do when we harbor sin in our lives. We don’t want to pray in such times, knowing we are disobedient to our Master, and He chooses not to hear us when we don’t honor Him with our allegiance. Prayer is a key part of our relationship with God; without it, we as God’s people are adrift, and at the mercy of our enemy, the Devil.

We must seek His face. This is closely akin to praying, mentioned above. However, the double repetition, in a more visible, tangible way is a Hebraic way to underscore the importance of earnestness, passion, urgency, and persistence in coming before God. We are called to metaphorically come face-to-face with God and find His love and forgiveness, not hide from Him, as our guilt and shame makes us want to do.

We must turn from our evil ways. This is the vivid picture of repentance, turning away from our sin and turning instead toward God. All sin is evil, since it is against God’s command; it promotes our way over His (pride). There must be an about face in our heart.

Sovereign Lord, you are God, and in charge of us, your people. Forgive our evil ways and grant us the forgiveness we desperately need, we pray.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 30 — NEHEMIAH 9:1-3

...and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors...they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God.

Why do we need to repent of our collective sins and the sins of our predecessors? After all, many of us never even knew them or the impact of their lives upon the church.

This is an excellent question. Obviously, the best answer has to do with the biblical record. When God's people recognized "their" sin in the Scriptural accounts we are given, they confessed and repented of it. In doing so they acknowledged their link to their predecessors, as well as recognizing the impact they will have upon future generations of God's people.

We see this more easily in our contemporaneous relationships. Our sins affect our colleagues, our brothers and sisters, and fellow members, just as their sins will affect us. What we don't see as easily is that the previous generation(s) had sin that may still affect us in the present, or even into the future, if we don't deal with it as we should.

Most churches—just like most generations of God's people in the Scripture—left their sin as stains, residue, etc., on subsequent generations, refusing to "own" it, confess it, and allow God to cleanse them from all sin. They passed it on, like germs or worse, in their DNA, to the next generation through indifference, neglect, and stiff-necked rebellion as they modeled poorly how to live out their covenant relationship with God.

We cannot afford to do the same. When Jesus calls the churches in the book of Revelation to repent, He is commanding them collectively to acknowledge this need and turn away from their sin. Only then could they, and we, be living in relationship with God as He commands and as we should desire. This is a key Christ-ordained step that we must make, as well, to be of greater usefulness for Him in His Kingdom.

God calls us to repentance out of His love for the Church, His Bride. We collectively need to ask God's forgiveness too, for the times we have strayed from His will, or replaced it with our own, or covered up sin for whatever reason. It's time to make things right with God; it's time to repent as His people and worship Him anew.

Jesus, we as your Bride have sinned against you. We will not blame others. Forgive us, Lord.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 31 — EXODUS 34:9

...my Lord, please go with us (even though this is a stiff-necked people), forgive our iniquity and our sin, and accept us as your own possession.

Are we taking responsible to pray for our church?

There are many such instances in the book of Exodus where Moses intercedes for the people of God. Over and over again, they grumble and complain, they refuse to obey or rebel against God's will and instructions for their life together. In most of these instances, one, many, or all of the people felt they knew better than their God-appointed leader Moses or even God Himself. Time after time, such sin got them in serious trouble.

The consequences were grave. Many died in the wilderness as a result of their rebellion. At other times, God withheld His power from them, or used it against them, as a consequence of their disobedience. Their sin left them impotent and vulnerable to the Enemy who would come against them.

In such times, God's people with its courageous leaders, need to step up and call "sin" sin, and admit that we are a selfish, obstinate people. Until we do, we are only deceiving ourselves.

Repentance as the people of God is not a shaming exercise; it is not meant to belittle or guilt us into alternative behavior. Rather, it is an exercise in God's discipline, which He tells us in His Word is a result of His love (Hebrews 12:6). Ultimately, it's not meant to be punitive at all, but rather to motivate us to desire to run back into the welcoming embrace of our loving Father.

Moses reminds us we are God's own possession. In other words, we belong to Him. Instead of that feeling restrictive, why not see it as liberating? For God Himself calls us His own! What could provide greater confidence, security, and purpose than this?

If we as a church are stiff-necked, hard-hearted, and a difficult people, then today you need to intercede on behalf of God's people. Ask Him to forgive His people, including you, and allow Him to have His way in your midst.

Thank you, Lord, for the recognition of our need for repentance. Help us to embrace that need, to intercede for each other, and to celebrate your ownership over Your church for Your glory and Name's sake.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 32 — EPHESIANS 4:4

...making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Everybody wants peace. The problem is you and I want it on our own terms, the terms we get to decide. When two or more entities are at odds with each other, the solution in their minds is usually selfish...what's best for me.

In this chapter, the apostle Paul tells us the bond of peace is evidence of God's unifying work among His people. This is most telling, since Paul's first major description of how the church lives out its calling is to be "one." He mentions it over and over here in the passage, clearly emphasizing its importance to the world around us (they see our witness), to the family of faith (we are siblings interdependent on each other), and ultimately to God Himself. He after all is the One who gives us the unity of the Spirit to start with! In other words, we can't manufacture unity; rather, God gives it graciously to those of us, you and me, who were so radically different before we were transformed by the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

This unity is based on the Gospel, not on any human personality or relational "we're all alike" principle. It's based on the good news that Jesus Christ has made us a family through His one-of-a-kind work on the cross for you and me. That's what unites us, despite obvious differences like race, gender, socio-economic status, jobs, age, health, marital status, and so on. Unity in the Gospel transcends all of this. We are one in Christ Jesus.

Here's the rub, then. While we can't make unity—it is the gift of the Spirit to us—we can break it. In fact, we are called to make every effort, to work hard at, keeping the unity of the Spirit. Every effort, not just some. This expects and demands our utmost, earnest, full on effort; it's that important.

Without unity, the Body of Christ is ill. Its life is disrupted, and its health endangered. And when the Body is sick, it can't function as it should. It struggles and fails to accomplish the purpose for which God brought it into being.

Am I keeping the unity of the Spirit? Am I working hard at this? You and I must labor diligently to see that the church is healthy and unified. If not, we've got some work to do in confession and repentance with our Lord. Let's make every effort to be One in the Lord.

Thank you, Spirit, for the unity you alone bring. Help me make every effort to keep us unified.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 33 — JEREMIAH 3:22

Return, you faithless children. I will heal your unfaithfulness. Here we are, coming to you, for you are the LORD our God.

The call to return is a call to repentance. According to Jeremiah, it is borne out of our failure to trust God and walk in faithfulness to Him.

What does faithfulness to God look like?

It means taking God at His Word.

It means doing what God commands us to do.

It means seeing our world as God sees it.

It means caring for others around us with the love of Christ.

If you need to return to God, it means you're headed in the wrong direction.

God's people were headed the wrong way when Jeremiah pronounced these words. They were headed toward disaster and judgment. They were traveling a path that would end with their exile and the destruction of their people, as they had known it. Why? Because they had not kept their covenant of relationship with God. They had broken faith with Him, in order to walk their own path.

The prophet suggests such behavior is infantile and childlike, when we want our own way and are rebellious. Immature believers and immature churches are this way, too. They choose to follow the world or their own opinions, rather than the Word of God. You choose yourself to be wise and mature when you are willing to see the need for unhindered relationship with God and the wisdom of remaining faithful to Him.

This reality can be reclaimed by you and me, and by our church when we are willing to repent of our selfish desires to do things our own way, and to say as Jeremiah encouraged his people to say, 'Here we are, coming to You, for You are the LORD our God.' Our admission of this truth takes humility and submission. It allows God His proper place as LORD over His people. It leaves us eager and ready to follow Him as He leads. Are we willing to come back to the LORD our God? The answer will reveal a lot about us, and our willingness for Him to have His way in His church and people. It's really all about Him!

Father, help me and our church to submit to your Lordship. We return to you and ask you again to lead us forward, for Your glory and our good.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 34 — JOEL 2:13

Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and He relents from sending disaster.

Today another prophet is calling for God's people to return to the LORD our God. But before you discount the importance of this message and say you're already heard it, check out the difference here. It's important.

Joel tells God's people to return to the LORD our God because of who He is. The character of God is filled with grace, compassion, and faithful love. Moreover, he is slow to get angry and will withhold disaster. He will do this, Joel says, if we return to Him. Because this is the nature of God, we can always count on it. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, according to the Scripture (Hebrews 13:8). His nature never changes (Malachi 3:6). In fact, this verse harkens back to a message hundreds and hundreds of years before, which spoke to the same character traits of God; it's mentioned by others in Scripture, as well.

All this to say, the eternal nature of God is not fickle, nor does God change His mind. This is truly, genuinely who He is. Thus, it is how He responds to His people when they are willing to return to Him. The question is, are we willing?

Joel commanded the people to "do surgery" on their hearts; they were unable or unwilling to follow God with hearts fixed on their own wants and desires, on their own priorities and agendas. Outward demonstrations of conviction of sin and the desire for repentance, like the tearing of clothes in their day, were not good enough. God looks on the heart not the external trappings of our behavior. We must reject the sin in our hearts and return to our faithful God, who calls us to come back to Him.

Perhaps like Joel, your church needs to hold a sacred solemn assembly, a time of confession and repentance as a congregation before God. Perhaps you together need to acknowledge your utter dependence upon Him and declare your intent on returning to Him as your faithful Lord and Master. If you are willing...

Do you as a church desire to experience His grace, compassion, and faithful love anew? He is patiently giving you another chance today. Return to Him today.

LORD God, you are giving us another opportunity to experience more of You as your people. Find us willing, faithful, and able to serve you as we should.

WEEK FIVE: REPENTING AS A CHURCH FAMILY

DAY 35 — 1 PETER 4:8

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another,
since love covers a multitude of sins.*

Peter heard Jesus talk a lot about love. As a follower of Christ, we know he was challenged by the love Jesus had for all kinds of people, including misfits and the marginalized. The Lord's own love for Peter, despite his personal shortcomings, sins, and failings, was transformative in his own life. The power of love in restoring him is a high point in the Biblical narrative. It conveys so much about the heart of God and the way, as one songwriter put it, "He looks beyond our sin and sees our need."

It is this kind of transcending love that Peter reflects on, that he personally knows and has experienced, when he writes these words. In advising scattered believers in a secular and discriminatory world, he declares that beyond all the good things we can do, beyond all the right things we should do, the best thing we must do is love one another. In fact, he goes further than this to say we must "maintain constant" love for one another.

Constancy is the key here. While the world waffles and vacillates, wobbling to and fro, we are to remain the same in our love for one another. While circumstances and situations may challenge this, we are to keep on loving each other. Through seasons in life, crises that emerge, and even wrongdoings that may come to light, we are to continue in love. Why? Because our love for one another is not based on these external things; it's based on the nature of God and the love He has given us to share. I need your love. You need my love. We need each other.

So, you and I are called to maintain it... not flag in it or withdraw from it. It's a command. We are to keep on keeping on when it comes to love. It is the spiritual sustenance the Spirit of God uses to enable us to grow to be more like Christ.

When churches struggle or get lost in conflict, they have forgotten love. Often, they are fixated on sin. Sin divides. Love unites. While sin must be dealt with properly through repentance and forgiveness, love transcends. It doesn't overlook sin; it overcomes it. It lives in the grace and mercy of God, not in the brokenness of our fallen state. It motivates and challenges us to be more like Christ, whose love for us covered a multitude of our sins.

Today, somebody will need your constant love for Christ's sake. Share it freely.

Lord, help me grow in my love for those around me, no matter how messy their lives may be.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 36 — JOHN 14:15

If you love me, keep my commands.

It's really fairly simple: God said it. That settles it. It doesn't matter whether I agree with it or not. It doesn't matter whether I understand it or not. It doesn't matter whether it makes sense to me or not.

All that matters is my obedience. We sing, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." This is true. It often takes a lot of trust to be obedient to what God is asking us to do. Henry Blackaby taught us that when God invites us to join Him in His work, He will bring us to a "crisis of belief" that is necessary. It is necessary for our growth as a disciple, since God loves us too much to leave us at the level of growth where we currently are. But it is also necessary to show us how much we truly trust God.

It's a "pop test," if you will. Do you remember those in your school days? Unexpected, but revealing. They showed us if we were prepared, equipped, and ready to take the next step.

God's tests, though, are not just about information. They reveal the depth of our relationship with Him. Trust is the glue that holds this relationship together.

Let me add another layer to this: not only must we trust and obey, but we must also love and obey. That's actually the challenge of this verse. You say you love Me?, Jesus asks. Then show Me. Prove it. Do what I've asked you to do. Therein lies the challenge.

We can say we love our Lord all day long, but if we are unwilling to keep His commands, we reveal ourselves to be liars. We don't really love Him at all. Or perhaps another way to put it is this: we love ourselves more.

The commands of God are not burdensome; they are beneficial. God has created them with your best interest in mind. So, when we fail to keep them, we are actually hurting ourselves (not God!). As a disciple and as a church, we need to get back to doing the things God expects of His children. We need to get back to doing the things we did as new believers and as a new church. We need to obey Him; we need to keep His commands.

Do this and you will grow in your love and devotion to our Savior and Lord. Do it out of your love for Him and what He has done for you.

Thank you, Jesus for Your faithful love. I will obey you as a demonstration of my love for You.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 37 — MICAH 6:8

He has told each of you what is good and what it is the LORD requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God.

When it comes to “doing,” where should we start? How do we get back to what God intended for us from the start? There are many places we could look in God’s Word, but here is one place where we are told what God expects of us. Let’s look at each.

Act justly. This expectation is external in nature. It has to do with our behavior. More than simply treating each other fairly (a relatively subjective word), we are to let justice reign in our actions toward others. The emphasis here is on our own responsibility in this regard. A just society and a just church depend upon just citizens and just disciples. We must value justice, by which we mean “rightness” for all, and we must model justice in our own lives. Every person has worth and value; we must recognize this and celebrate it with unbiased treatment to them and for them.

Love faithfulness. This expectation is internal in nature. It has to do with the heart. While the noun translated here “faithfulness” is typically rendered “mercy,” the meaning is broad enough for both to be true. We are to be faithful toward others, toward the people of God, and of course, toward God. To do so starts now with our actions, but with a commitment of our hearts to be focused, intentional persons of our word with integrity toward all. We will be honest, compassionate, merciful in all our dealings; moreover, we will love to be this way because it is right and it is good.

Walk humbly with our God. This expectation is vertical in nature. The euphemism of walking as a metaphor of how we live our life is not to be missed. We are to make progress, and it doesn’t have to be fast, streaky, or winded. It should rather be consistent, with steady forward movement in our relationship with God. This can only happen when we live humbly. This humility is a recognition of who God is and who we are. We submit to His leadership, and we respond obediently to His commands. And we do all of this out of love for God, who first loved us.

Micah’s prophetic voice reminds God’s people they are in grave danger of losing touch with God’s purpose for their existence. As a result, it must not be lost on any of us that this purpose is wrapped up in our relationships with others (act and be) and with Him (walk). We live out our calling before a world who needs desperately to see Jesus in us.

Father, may these three things be foundational in my relationships with you and others.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 38 — MATTHEW 18:21-22

...Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times? I tell you, not as many as seven, Jesus replied, but seventy times seven.

Forgiveness. It's hard. Sometimes seemingly impossible. We've been wronged, hurt, and wounded. The pain is real. The memories vivid. And scars remain. Perhaps for the rest of our life.

Yet, there is nothing more like God in our human souls than the power of forgiveness. It is a divine attribute, for in offering it we are transcending our humanity and granting another person grace, something they truly do not deserve.

In your life and in the life of the church, forgiveness is needed for several reasons. First, all of us as individuals and many of the churches we attend have failed in our relationships with one another. Unfulfilled promises, blatant mean-spirited resistance, unnecessary conflict: all of these experiences and more may have been a part of our relationships with others. Offense has slapped you and me in the face and left us wanting justice.

Second, we have wronged God through our individual and corporate sins. Full stop. And yet, the Almighty has chosen to forgive us. He does this through the atonement of Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for our sins. Jesus said of those who were crucifying Him, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Third, when we fail to forgive those who have wronged us, we allow them to continue having power over our hearts and lives. They are dictating the pain of our souls and our unrequited desire for vengeance. They are holding our hearts captive.

Finally, when we forgive, we are demonstrating our trust in God to bring justice and make all things right. He promises to do this. The question for me often is, am I willing to trust Jesus to take care of this correctly?

Jesus taught His disciples the power that forgiveness has to release the burdens we bear, to free us from the entanglements of pain, and to heal our wounded spirit. It grants us peace for our hearts, freedom for our soul, and the ability to live out our full potential in the glory of God's grace. It is a needed and necessary element in life with Him and our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is power in forgiveness offered and in forgiveness received.

Father, help me to forgive others who have wronged me, just as You have forgiven me.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 39 — PSALM 119:11

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.

The Word of God is our Father's primary way of sharing His message with us. The Bible, as we call it, is God's inspired word for faith and practice. In other words, God gives us His Word to believe it because of its source, and to live it out because of its power for behavior.

The Psalmist who wrote this text reminds us that this Word is not to be taken lightly. It's important enough for us to remember it. In fact, by hiding it in his heart, he is suggesting the value of memorizing it. When this happens, it is written not simply on paper, but also on the tablet of his heart. There he can recall it as it is needed in his day to day life. It inspires him and guides him.

More than that, the Word of God affects his behavior. It keeps his feet on the right path. It provides boundaries to keep you and me away from sin. By implication, if it keeps us from sin, then it encourages us to live freely within these boundaries as we should. This is always for God's glory, but also for our own good.

The Word of God is foundational to your growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ. You must hear it, receive it, believe it, and allow it to grow in your heart. In addition, you must apply its truths to your life. Living out the Word of God enables us to experience God's will and join Him in His mission here on earth. This is important for every believer and also for His church.

Your opinions and ideas may be important. But as a family of faith, it is God's Word, not our own, that lays the foundation for all we believe and the life we share in our community. We are on mission for Him. That's why we exist. Anything less and we fall short. Why does our church exist? What is God's purpose for us here in this community?

In the book of James, we are reminded, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves." We must prioritize the Word of God and allow it to give direction to our lives in service to God. We must live it out daily, moment by moment (not just on Sunday mornings). If we don't, we have fooled ourselves into thinking God's Word is making a difference in our own lives, or in the impact of His church to reach others for Jesus.

Thank you God for your Word. Help me to value it, love it, learn from it, apply it, and live it out in all areas of my life and Your church, so that our lives together may glorify You.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 40 — 1 THESSALONIANS 5:17-18

*Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Along with the command to rejoice always given in verse 16, the apostle Paul tells us that we are to pray and give thanks, because this is God's will for us. Today we want to focus on the prayer aspect of this command, which is critical to our life for Jesus.

Praying is often misunderstood to mean simply asking God for our wants and needs. This is certainly a part of prayer, but it is far from all the word means. Prayer is communing with God. This is always a dialogue, not a monologue. And sometimes it doesn't even involve words, but simply a recognition that we are together in the presence of God. In addition, prayer includes praise and adoration, confession and repentance, intercession for others, and of course, as mentioned here, thanksgiving for God's goodness upon our lives.

Nothing is more important in your relationship with God than prayer. You and I need to commune with Him daily. We are to do it "without ceasing" when we are:

- Being constantly aware of His presence with us throughout the day
- Sharing with Him the things on our heart briefly and conversationally
- Listening to hear Him if He desires to speak back to us
- Attuning ourselves to His Spirit in a comment from someone else, a circumstance we may encounter, or something visual we may see

As God's people, we together need to value prayer in these ways, too. God uses prayer to unite our hearts and to align them with His mission for us. Prayer will dissolve divisions, replace agendas, restore relationships, and exalt our Savior. But we must pray for more than just "sick" people! While this is good and needful, the focal part of our prayer as a church needs to be on God's "will being done in (your city) as it is in heaven."

Gratitude for what He has already done is a great and needed way to start that prayer, for it keeps our hearts soft in recognition that God is the Source of all blessing upon our lives. What you pray for is an indication of what you live for. What are you thankful for today? Don't take these things for granted; God in His mercy and grace has given them to you. Receptive and open hearts with continually tell Him how grateful you are.

*Precious Lord, make my prayer life vibrant and relaxed, full of awareness of your presence.
Help me to always give thanks to you, and to live my life in sync with You.*

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 41 — EPHESIANS 4:11-12, 16

And He gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ...in love by the proper working of each individual part.

The letter to the Ephesians is all about how the church lives out its responsibility to God in this world. Here in this passage, we see that God gives leaders to the church—including pastors and teachers—to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

First, the author Paul wants us to know that the role of the leaders is NOT to do all the work of ministry themselves. Rather they are to equip the saints for this purpose. The word “equip” was used in the ancient world to speak of doctors resetting a broken bone to make it functional again. It was also used to speak of fishing nets that needed to be mended so they could become useful again. The picture is clear: the equipping role is to prepare and enable the saints to do this work.

Second, you probably don’t feel very much like a saint, but the Bible often says you are one! Did you know this? In fact, all God’s children are saints (not dead people who have performed some kind of miracle). When the Bible speaks of saints, it is speaking of the sanctifying work of God upon living followers of Christ. They are not only living, but in community with other saints (the body of Christ), as well. So, pastors and teachers are to prepare you; that is a key part of their calling before God.

Third, the work of “ministry” is not specialized seminary training only for pastors and teachers. Ministry in the Bible simply means “service” and here we are told it is the work of everybody in the church: you, me, and your pastors and teachers. We all serve, as Christ Himself served us while He was here on earth.

Finally, each individual part—every one of us—has a part to play, a role to serve, in building up the body of Christ and enabling it to fulfill the purpose for which it is here. What does that mean for you? Something unique, I am sure, because of your own experiences and connections. However, for all of us it means building up the body of Christ by loving others, nurturing relationships, along with serving and sharing the Gospel of Jesus with anyone we can. Those around us depend on us doing this; the church needs us to reclaim this, too.

Dear God, thank you for giving me a role in your church. Help me build up the body of Christ through my love, my service, and my unique connections with others so your Gospel can go forth effectively here in our community and beyond.

WEEK SIX: RENEWING OUR LOVE

DAY 42 — MATTHEW 28:19

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ..

This “Great Commission” passage is in the middle of one of the most well-known sayings of Jesus (vv. 18-20) and serves as a fitting conclusion to the Gospel of Matthew. For the apostle, Jesus’ command to extend this ministry to “all nations” was revolutionary. Jews in his day had very little to do with the Gentile world; yet, Jesus tells them a primary responsibility they have is to make sure that everyone, everywhere has a chance to hear and respond to the Gospel.

The focus on the passage is to “make disciples” (not simply “teach them,” as some translations put it). This word is only used here in the entire Bible, so its uniqueness must not be overlooked. Jesus is reminded us of all that the Gospel is about salvation (eternal redemption from our sin), yes, but it’s also about sanctification (growing more like Jesus daily as a follower of Christ). Disciple-making is not an event; it’s a process.

For this to happen, we must go to the people. In fact, Jesus suggests in the prior verse that we are expected to go. It can rightly be translated “as you go,” too. Going to the people means taking the initiative and embodying the role we have been given, just as Jesus “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), so that we might know the love of God for ourselves.

If our church is going to get back to doing what must be done, the things we did at first, then, we must seriously apply our lives to sharing the Gospel with others around us, so that they can become recipients of His grace in salvation and followers of Christ, too. We like to say it this way: evangelism and discipleship are integral to us being the church Jesus has intended all along.

Are we doing this? How many times have you shared your Jesus story and/or the Gospel with someone recently? Who am I discipling as a follower of Christ? If we leave these things for others, we are neglecting our own responsibility to be a witness for Jesus. And if we’re not careful, we’ll let other activities and experiences crowd out this specific and intentional item Jesus charged us as His church with doing. We must share the Good News and equip them to live out their love for Jesus, too.

God, forgive me for neglecting opportunities to help others know you too. Help us as a church to share the Gospel as we should, and equip new believers to grow in their faith.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 43 — ACTS 2:42-47

...praising God and enjoying the favor of the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The early days of the church in the book of Acts are a model for how any church can do the things they did at first, what we as God's people are called to be and do for our Lord. Verses 42 through 47 highlight these items in a kind of summary statement of the life of the church. It serves as a checklist for us and our church, as we near the end of this journey.

They devoted themselves...

- **To the apostles' teaching.** They were learning and applying the teachings of Jesus in their own lives as followers of Christ.
- **To the fellowship.** They recognized their interdependence upon each other and strengthened the unity of the Body through "community" (common + unity).
- **To the breaking of bread.** They worshipped God and participated in the Lord's Supper, reminding them always of God's love and sacrifice for them and of His return.
- **To prayer.** They spent time communing with God, hearing and speaking to Him about all needs and concerns, in order to align their hearts with His own.
- **To meeting together.** They knew the importance of gathering together in large groups (the Temple) and in small groups (from house to house) to share love and encourage each other.

As a result, they were ...

- **Filled with awe and wonder.** They marveled at the greatness of their God, His majesty, and His love.
- **Seeing God work among them in miraculous ways.** They experienced what He was doing in and through them that could not be explained apart from God's involvement.
- **Selling and distributing goods to meet needs.** They were sacrificing and offering of their lives and possessions to others in need, for they knew God to be generous and faithful.
- **Celebrating God and the relationships they shared.** They rejoiced in a God who loved them so much, and thus found ways to show and share that love with others for His glory.

Father, I desire our church to return to doing these things we too did at first. Help us, I pray.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 44 — LUKE 15:25

Son, he said to him, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

The story of what is often called “the Prodigal Son” has been recognized as one of the best short stories every told. It is the third of the parables Jesus tells about something lost actually being found, and represents a sweeping look at the love of the Father who illustrates God for His children.

The younger son, whose story is told in verses 11-24, is like many of us within the church who rebelled and ran away from God in disobedience and defiance. We wanted to do our “own thing” on our own terms. Over time, though, it left us hungering for something we couldn’t find apart from the Father; love, provision, and more.

The older son, whose story is told in verses 25-32, is like many of the rest of us who stayed close to the Father, maybe even “grew up in church,” but over time our hearts became distant and hard-hearted. Even though we were close by, we still wanted our own way. While we “slaved away” in our service for the Father, we mistook what He wanted most from us: not our labor, but our love.

Two key lessons jump out at us from this realization: first, we can never run so far from God that His love cannot reach us. And second on the other hand, we can’t stay so close that we earn His love through our efforts, instead of His eager grace. Both are deceptions that keep us from experiencing the love the Father shares with us.

But the clincher in this story is the simple, yet profound statements He makes to both boys, “this Son of mine” (verse 24) and “Son” (verse 31). Don’t miss this: He sees them as His children, not His servants. He loves them for who they are, not for what they’ve done.

We are made in the image of God, redeemed by the Son of God, and given the Spirit of God. Our God has created you to be in relationship with Him. Jesus has done everything necessary to make this possible. And the Holy Spirit equips and empowers us to live out our love and gratitude to Him every day.

So serve God out of gratitude and joy as a cherished child of God. Show your love and devotion to your Father by honoring Him with your life, rejoicing in His provision, and not by trying to run from or win His favor. He already loves you; rest in that love.

Father, thank you that I am your child, not your servant. May I live my life for you out of love, not duty and obligation. I am humbled and grateful.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 45 — PSALM 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need.

The 23rd Psalm is among the most well-known passages of Scripture. Surprisingly, it is read most often at funeral or graveside ceremonies, rather than in regular church services. Perhaps this is because of the comfort it expresses to all of us who are God's children. Still, the emphasis of this short psalm by David is on God's ever-present protection and provision in the everyday moments of life.

The Psalmist declares the theme of his short song in verse one, when he depicts God as his own shepherd. As a shepherd himself, David would know the analogy well.

God provides for him,
protects him,
guides him,
feeds him,
cares for him,
and corrects him.

God has his present and his future at heart. As a result, David declares that he has everything he needs. God has not forgotten or neglected anything.

This is a keen reminder for you and me today. God knows our needs and concerns. He is both aware of and sees things we don't see. He has your best interest in mind at all times. His heart is bent toward you. Why? Because He loves you...He is YOUR shepherd, too.

There's a final encouraging reminder in this psalm, too. The final verse tells us that God's mercy and goodness pursue us all the days of our life. He takes the initiative in coming after you and me with His boundless, limitless kindnesses. Why? Because He cares for you. And that doesn't end when this life is over; it continues in a dwelling place He has for you throughout all eternity. Wow. God's love for you never ends. Never.

Today, remember that you are loved. You are on God's heart and in His sight. So, turn your heart toward Him. Ask Him to grow your love and appreciation for a benevolent Father who takes care of what you need. Stand in awe of a Creator who would shepherd you like this.

Thank you God for being my Good Shepherd. I am humbled. Enlarge my love for you, I pray.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 46 — JAMES 1:2-3

Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

Everybody deals with trials. Everybody. These difficulties are clothed in different experiences, from obstacles to heartache to opposition. Tough times are a part of our humanity, so it stands to reason that Christ-followers as well as non-believers encounter them.

There's a difference, though. God uses trials in your life to "test your faith." You remember tests in school, don't you? They were given to show how well you knew the material, how well you were prepared to address the topic under scrutiny. In a similar fashion, God uses trials in your life to show you how well you have prepared for the rigors and needs of life.

Have you prepared for the tests that are coming your way? Growing your faith in God is the key. Your faith, or trust in God to keep His Word, should not be the same now as it was when you first came into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Instead, it should be stronger and greater than it was in the past. To grow it, God puts you in situations where you have to trust Him for the resolution. You have to let God be God.

When you do, you pass the test and learn the lesson He was teaching you. Now, you can move forward and continue to grow in the next thing He needs to teach you. But only after you pass the test or trial He has before you right now.

The good news for you and me is God is using these trials, as painful and challenging as they may be, to produce endurance in you. This will strengthen you for the next trial coming your way, and it will remind you that God is always faithful: He never abandons you or forgets about you.

Sometimes the trials we experience are a form of His discipline, to protect us and keep us from making tragic mistakes. But you need to know that God does this out of His love for you, not out of His absence of love for you. *"For the Lord disciplines the one He loves..."* (Hebrews 12:6a). So, does God have your attention, and what is He trying to teach you? Pay attention, for the lesson is valuable for the next step in your own walk with Him.

Thank you, Father, even in the hardships of life. For You make all things work together for good to those who love you and are called according to Your purpose.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 47 — JEREMIAH 31:33

*...I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

The prophet Jeremiah is sharing a message of God's future, redemptive work with the children of Judah and Israel while they were largely in Babylonian exile. He points them, and us, in this passage to a new covenant (verse 31) He will make with God's people. This covenant is one He will write not on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of everyone of His children. It is a new covenant (or "New Testament") that became reality through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for you and me.

Today God wants you to realize you are in a relationship with Him. This is not about rules and regulations; it's not essentially about do's and don'ts. Rather, it's about love, joy, peace, protection, wisdom, grace, and forgiveness. It's where trust and hope shine through. It's about companionship and leadership through the darkest of days. God wants your heart to beat with His heart; He wants your steps to keep in stride with His.

You're never alone. The Spirit of God indwells you and will enable you to remember His presence and provision. He is your constant companion and will never leave you or forsake you. Never. Not today. Not any day. He is your God, and you are His child.

Later in this same passage God goes on to declare He will forgive your sins and remember them no more. While the Devil tries to shame you and silence you by reminding you of your sins (just as he does with me, too), God does NOT do this. All of your sins—past, present, and future—were nailed to the cross with Jesus. God has forgiven them; He has forgiven you.

And He remembers them no more. Gone. Forgotten. Destroyed. If God doesn't hold them against you, then shouldn't you let go of them, too?

If you hold on to them and let the Devil accuse you, then you're letting him have power over you. But you don't have to let him. Say these three words out loud:

It. Is. Finished!

Jesus paid the entire and complete price for your sins, so that you don't have to. He has established a new covenant of love with you and me, written on our hearts for all eternity.

Thank you, Jesus, for Your sacrifice for me. Thank you for giving us a new covenant of love.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 48 — 1 JOHN 4:16

And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him.

We've been in this chapter before, back on day 3. There we recognized that the love we have and share is because of God loving us first. Here, John writes to the church to remind them love is integral to the character of God. It is His nature to love. But not just to love...it is His nature to love you. Yes, you.

For some of us, it takes a process of many winding roads and unexpected detours to realize that God's love never fails us. Your sins and mistakes don't short-circuit His love for you. Your limitations and weaknesses don't cause Him to run away from you. Your doubts and questions don't make Him wonder why He chose you. In all of this and much more, time and again we come to realize that when we remain in God we are experiencing His unfailing love. It never ends. It never lags. It never goes out. It never dies.

As you grow up in Christ, this passage reminds us that our confidence in this unfailing, unflagging love will also grow. There's nothing you have done or will do that will keep God's love away from you! So, live in the confidence of that love. While others on this planet may seem to love you for a while and then it fades or goes away, don't let these experiences color the way you see the love of God. Pray that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt, and believe in the deepest recesses of your heart, the love God has for you.

When you know this, when you believe this, then it is so much easier to abide in the constant, consistent, always life-giving love God has for you. And because you do, you find yourself in the embrace of God's own arms around you, encouraging you not accusing you, guiding you not hiding from you. Do this, and not only do you find the love of God; more importantly, you find the God of love.

Now remain in Him. And He will remain in you.

Lord, help me mature in my understanding of Your love for me. And help me to remain in that love...in You.

WEEK SEVEN: CELEBRATING RENEWED LOVE

DAY 49 — REVELATION 21:4-5a

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away...Look, I am making everything new.

Today we find ourselves in the final book of the Bible, just one chapter from the final words shared with us about eternity. Here the author writes about our future eternal dwelling place and reminds us that the love of God we celebrate is not simply for this day and age. It is for all eternity.

Let me repeat that: the love we share with God lasts for all eternity. In the future yet to come, we will no longer have to deal with pain, suffering, sadness, and our ultimate enemy, death. These things will be banished forever. Rather, we will live in the light of God's love, and experience joy, peace, celebration, freedom and fulfillment for all time. These are byproducts of the Source of them all, our great God.

Jesus anticipates a day when He will make all things new.

No more heartache.

No more burdens.

No more conflict.

No more fears.

You see, the love God shares with us lasts for all eternity. And this enables us to share our love in praise and adoration with our Lord out of a life filled with wonder, awe, and humility. He has included you in His plan for all the ages! And this should evoke our greatest gratitude. Let me remind you: we love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Are you looking forward to that day? Do you prayerfully expect it? You should, even to the point of preparing your heart and soul for it. What we do now anticipates the future. So live today in light of eternity. In fact, let eternity invade the present as you live your life today for Jesus. Live in the freedom, the joy, and the peace only God can bring to your life.

Yes, the love we share with God lasts for all eternity...and that starts right now.

Lord Jesus, with Your love make me new today and for all eternity.

WEEK EIGHT: CELEBRATING THE GIVER OF LOVE

DAY 50 — 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-15

For the love of Christ compels us,...He died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One who died for them and was raised.

There is no end to the love of God. It continues unyielding into the endless future. But it also extends to the expansive embrace of our universe. It burrows deep within the recesses of our soul. It permeates the presence of every detail in our lives.

So today we express our gratitude to God for the boundless experience of God's love, the gift of Jesus Christ for you and me. He died that we could live. He was raised so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for Him. His love is a sacrificial love. His love is a redeeming love. His love is a captivating love.

Such love should be—it must be—the motivating factor in the life we live before God and others. The apostle Paul says he was “compelled” by this love; this vivid word means “persuaded” or “moved to action.” It shouts for all to hear that love is a debt that is never fully repaid. It is a debt we owe to all others around us (Romans 13:8).

How do you pay that debt in your life? Today you will have opportunities to be kind and say encouraging words to others who feel neglected or forgotten. Today you will have the privilege to do a generous act for someone who cannot do it for him or herself. Today you will have the chance to share the hope of “good news” with another who is lost or struggling in life. These are “divine appointments” orchestrated by God, not simply random, haphazard coincidences in life. They are moments God is offering you to be compelled by His love for the benefit of others who need to experience this love themselves.

Do you remember when someone shared that message of God's love with you? Will you pause long enough to reflect on the difference it has made in your life? Thank God today for that person and that moment, which changed your life forever.

Then, make up your mind to be that person and find that moment to help someone else today, which will likewise change their life for all eternity. All because of the love of Christ.

Thank you Lord Jesus for your amazing love! Compel me to share it with others, too.



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