Week 4

**God Is…Love**

## Love

If once we accept it as true that the whole Power behind this astonishing Universe is of that kind of character that Christ could only describe as “Father”, the whole of life is transfigured.

J. B. Phillips

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Day 22

## How God Describes Himself

Read your Bible: [Exodus 34:1–10](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+34%3A1-10&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*The lord, the lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.* [Exodus 34:6](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+34%3A6&version=NIV)

This is a study about knowing God better.

When you want to know what someone’s like, you could ask other people who know that person.

Or you could go right to the source: You could meet the person you’re interested in, hang out, ask questions.

That’s exactly what Moses does. With God.

In Exodus 33:18. Moses says, “I beg you, show me your glory!”

And God answers.

Now, after all the wonders God showed Job, after all the creative masterpieces you saw the Psalmists singing about, after the omnipresence we studied last week, what would you expect God to reveal? What kind of scorching, lightning-bolt flash of shock and awe comes next?

What, specifically, is His glory?

What comes next is God’s great self-description. It’s the moment God defines Himself, God’s answer to the question, “What are you like?”

I mean, this is huge.

God is telling me what He wants me to really, really make sure I know about Him.

My suspicion that this is of major importance is confirmed by theologian J. Carl Laney. He points out how many times God’s words in these verses are quoted in the Old Testament. Ready for the list? These words are reiterated in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8,17; 145:8; Jeremiah 32:18–19; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2. [41](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n41) Whew.

And that doesn’t even count how many times paraphrases of these words are in the Bible. Since you ask: They’re in Deuteronomy 5:9–10; 1 Kings 3:6; Lamentations 3:32; Daniel 9:4; and Nahum 1:3.

So the writers of the Bible obviously thought this was pretty important, a foundational statement about what God is like.

But here’s something strange: As Laney points out, modern theologians hardly mention these verses when discussing God’s attributes. In fact, in the massive classic Systematic Theologyby L. S. Chafer, he doesn’t even quote these verses at all, in hundreds of pages describing God! Somehow this has fallen off the radar.

Yet this is how God describes Himself.

I think we’d better take a closer look.

The historical context is crucial: This comes at a moral low point for Israel.

In Exodus 32, Moses is meeting with God on Mount Sinai to get the tablets of the law. Meanwhile, the people of Israel decide God’s taking too long to get back to them, so they’ll make a golden idol to worship –a god more to their liking, who keeps their agenda, on their clock. It’s that old problem again: Preferring the gods we make to the God Who is. Wanting a puppet godlet whose strings we can pull instead of the One who really pulls the strings.

In the next chapter, a discouraged Moses meets with God and says, “If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you” (Exodus 33:13). Then he ups the ante and says, “Show me your glory!” (v. 18)

Moses is asking for God’s full self-disclosure. He longs for a genuine look at the core of the Creator, the depths of the Divine. Idol-free worship.

Because of what has just happened with the golden calf, I would completely expect God to answer with something like: “Moses, you have failed in your leadership miserably. You are being replaced. I am a very angry God and you humans drive me crazy. I part the Red Sea, I lead you with the fire, and this is the thanks I get?! You’re gone, you’re toast!”

What actually happens is this:

*Then the lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The lord, the lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”* Exodus 34:5–7a

God describes Himself in the very moment of an entire nation’s rebellion…

…and focuses on His love.

Look at each of the words God uses.

Compassionate.

The Hebrew word translated “compassionate” literally means “love rooted in a deep bond.” Deep bond?! The people had basically just spit in His face! But God is talking about His bond of love for us. It reminds me of Jesus on the cross, loving the very people who spit at Him, insult Him, and nail Him to wood.

Gracious.

According to J. Carl Laney, the Hebrew word here means “a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need.” It’s unconditional love in action. By it God defines Himself.

Slow to anger.

Despite popular misconceptions, God does not have anger management issues. The Hebrew expression for patience used here literally means “long-nosed,” referring to the tendency for your nose to get red when you’re mad. God says, maybe with a trace of a smile, that it takes a long time for His face to get red! He’s saying He is in no hurry to judge sinners (huge relief to me).

Abounding in love…

The specific word for “love” here means “loyal love.” I may be disloyal. I may fail in my promises. I may prove unfaithful to my confession on any given day. Yet God is loyally loving to me through it all. In fact, the word “abounding” means He overflows with this —

and faithfulness.

Feelings of love are not much good without faithfulness. Maybe someone told you once they loved you. And they might have even meant it at the time. But they were not faithful.

I am so sorry for your pain. But I want you to know: God is not like that. He will never say, “I am just not in love with you anymore.” He abounds in faithfulness!

And God just keeps defining Himself as One who loves: Maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

I love that word maintaining. God’s love is not just a noun; it’s a verb. He actively keeps a steady supply of love going to the wicked, rebellious, and sinful.

He doesn’t just feel love; He does love.

One scholar says the word “thousands” means “thousands of generations” so this means He is the source of love to all people in history.

Of course God also explains later in these verses that there will be consequences to sin. Listen well, because these are words of warning from One who loves you: Those consequences will be felt not only by you, but may ripple out to your family, perhaps even for generations.

Because you love, you warn your children.

Because God loves, God warns His children.

But again, what is the big picture? In word after word, in His great self-revelation to Moses, God focuses on His infinite, loyal, faithful, love in action!

This, He says, is His glory.

What’s your response to all that?

When Moses hears this, the Bible says he “bowed to the ground at once and worshiped.” (Exodus 34:8)

God reveals the most important thing to know about Himself: He loves us. And Moses loves Him back.

The most important thing you can know is that God loves you.

And the most important thing you can do is love Him back.

What other response is appropriate when I hear the God of the Universe emphasizing, not His power, or even merely his objective presence, but His love? To me?

To me, the one who has fashioned idols when I thought God was taking too long to get back to me.

To me, the one who with that crowd at the base of the mountain has at times worshipped the stupid golden calf of pleasure or prestige or possessions or (most insidiously) pride of religious performance.

To me, to you, God suddenly appears in His glory and unexpectedly announces… His powerful love.

Wow. As you study the love of God this week, may you too be moved as Moses was — to bow and worship!

God is… love.

### Questions For Reflection

What intrigues, impresses, or surprises you about God’s self-description in Exodus 34:1–10?

What difference does it make for you to believe these things are true of God?

Day 23

## He Came to My Rescue

Read your Bible: [John 1:1–18](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A1-18&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.* [John 1:14](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A14&version=NIV)

I was reading about the famous philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and found a twist to his tale that surprised me.[42](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n42)

As a kid he was very involved in church. Then at 18 he rejected the faith of his deeply religious family, especially his mother.

He despised Christianity as “the religion of the weak,” and promoted instead the “will to power.” He wrote the book Man and Superman. Nietzsche insisted he and his followers were the new supermen, beyond mere notions of good and evil. They were — he said — the new gods.

In fact, Nietzsche predicted that in the future, history would no longer be divided into before Christ and after Christ, but before Nietzsche and after Nietzsche.

Didn’t quite work out that way.

His mind began to break down. His health too. He began to go blind. Then his friends put him in an insane asylum.

And it was at that dark hour his Christian mother re-entered his life. She’d heard about what happened and came to claim him and take him home.

Her boy had rejected her — and everything she loved. But she took him into her arms and devoted the rest of her life to his care. And people who visited would sometimes see her rocking to sleep the broken body of this man who had claimed to be a superman.

Who was he, that she should be mindful of him?

He didn’t do anything to make himself lovable. In fact, he was incapable of it as his mental health deteriorated. What logical reason was there for her to love him?

This kind of love cannot be explained by logic. He was her **child**. She loved him with unwavering, unconditional love.

Like Nietzsche’s mother, God comes looking for us.

He knows we are incapable of seeking Him in any way that leads to freedom. He weeps that we are locked in a prison of our own making.

So He uses all the power at His command, the same amazing power that made the Universe, to come near, to be born into our mess, to enter the asylum that is our world. And He embraces us. And takes us home.

If God’s greatest self-description was to Moses, then His ultimate self-revelation was when He went beyond the middlemen, past the prophets, and came Himself.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together… and by him God reconciled everything to himself…*Colossians 1:15, 17

The One who created became a part of the creation. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, which is what the word “incarnate” literally means.

The indescribable, infinite, invisible One came to earth in a form that was describable, finite, observable. To rescue you.

*The Son reflects God’s glory, and everything about him represents God exactly.* Hebrews 1:1–3

Jesus shows you what God is like!

When Jesus walked around on earth and patted the heads of babies, forgave harlots, and blessed mankind, He was simply God acting like God in a given situation. — A.W. Tozer [43](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n43)

God acting like God.

Want to know what God is like?

You can see His power in His creation. But look what Jesus shows you. There’s God…

Hanging out with the prostitutes and lepers,
reprimanding the priests and religious teachers,
passionately outspoken about His love for the lost,
very angry over religious legalism,
delighted with children,
healing the sick,
giving rest to the weary.

### The Attributes of God Expressed in the Incarnation

Think of the God you’ve come to know in this study. Absolutely powerful. Perfectly present. And infinitely loving.

To me, if these are all true, then the incarnation follows. God had the means and the motive.

If God is unlimited in power, all about closeness, and perfect in love, He would be able to come near — and He would want to come near. Not only to show us the way, but to be the way.

In fact, it is precisely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that I see God’s power and presence and love most clearly.

I think any search-and-rescue story, like the one about Nietzsche’s mom, touches me because it reflects this even greater cosmic rescue mission: God powerfully and lovingly comes to rescue you and me, at His expense, when our attempts at being god fail.

He calls your name.
He longs to hold you again.

Not because you have impressed Him.
Not because you have met His expectations.
Not because you are a Super-Man or Super-Woman.
But because He is love.

God is… my Rescuer.

Friedrich Nietzsche and his mother

### Questions For Reflection

How does it impact you to think that the all-powerful God is also all-loving?

What does it show us about God’s character that He came into the world the way He did, and then behaved the way He did, as Jesus Christ?

Each day for the rest of this week, ask yourself these two questions: Have I thanked God for His love to me today? Have I shown love to someone today?

Day 24

## For God So Loved

Read your Bible: [John 3:1–17](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+3%3A1-17&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* [John 3:16 NLT](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+3%3A16&version=NLT)

Several years ago Laurie and I were returning from a long vacation. We were expecting our first child and after we landed in the U.S. for a customs check Laurie just really wanted to get on the next plane to go home.

But when we got to the customs line the wait was unusually long and it looked like we were going to miss our connection home.

I told her, “Hey, cheer up — maybe the airline will give us a free night in a hotel if we miss our connection! We can have a romantic night in the city!” She was tired and sick and looked at me like, “If you continue being happy about that possibility I may be forced to kill you.”

So I scurried to the customs official and dared to say, “Look, I know this is out of the ordinary but my wife is pregnant — and between us, she is possibly homicidal right now — and we need to make our flight, so can you bump us to the front of the line so we can make the connection?”

He responded, “Hmmm.” And I don’t know why he asks me this next, but he says, “What’s your job?”

I said, “Well, I’m a pastor.”

And he said, “Riiiight. You have no idea how often people try to use that line.” And then he challenged me: “If you’re really a pastor, recite John 3:16.” Like it was his fail-safe! As if no one but a pastor could possibly know this!

He folded his arms and looked at me. I glanced back. My wife was looking at me. And I thought, “I’m gonna choke! I’ll end up spitting out the Gettysburg Address or something!” So I took a deep breath… and recited…

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

And he said, “Wow, you must be a pastor! Move to the front of the line, Reverend!”

We got home on time. But it was no prodigious feat of memory. Of course I knew John 3:16 — as a church kid, I learned it before Kindergarten. It must be the very first verse that anyone growing up in Sunday School is taught. And it’s a good one.

Only problem: It suffers from what I call the “Pledge of Allegiance factor.”

Ever really listen to kids saying the Pledge? Usually it’s just a string of sounds that you suspect make no sense to the kids at all, something like:

I pledge all agents to the flag of the United States of a miracle, and total reap puppets four witch it’s sands, won Asian, under guard, with libber tea and just its fur all.

The same might be said of the truths in John 3:16. We know each syllable, the very cadence, so well, the words can lose their meaning.

So check this out: This may seem obvious, but John 3:16 is set up by the verses that come right before it, John 3:14–15:

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”*

Uh… Moses lifting up a snake? That’s referring to a strange story in Numbers 21. In that passage the Israelites are in the desert, dying from poisonous snakebites. There is no antidote.

So God tells Moses He’s going to do a miracle.

He instructs Moses to make a brass symbol of a snake, put it on a pole and lift it high, and anyone who merely looks on it in faith will be healed by God’s grace.

Notice the artistic way our creative God heals: He turns the very symbol of death, the poisonous snake, into a symbol of hope and healing.

That healing symbol, by the way, is where we get the caduceus, the symbol for physicians in our society today.

See the parallels to you and me?

The Bible says we’re dying of a poison in our soul. So Jesus is sacrificed on a cross, lifted up for all humans to see. If we look on that act in faith, we are healed. It’s a beautiful, artistic, creative, loving act of grace from God. The cross, the very icon of death, becomes a symbol of hope and healing.

Now that you know the background, look again at the well-known words:

For God. The same omnipotent and majestic and holy God you’ve been studying.

So loved. He didn’t just look on in amusement or anger or apathy. He deeply, passionately, wildly, expensively loved.

The world. Every child. Every man and woman. Every law-giver and law-enforcer. Every criminal and con-man. Every terrorist and every missionary. Me. You.

He gave. Not He demanded. Not He received. Not He expected. He gave. It’s always all about what God gives, not what I do. That’s grace. When you think about it, there really could be no other way but grace: What could I possibly do to merit anything from an infinite God?

His Son. He didn’t just give a set of principles. The Father gave His one and only Son.

That whoever believes does not perish from the poison. Not whoever works real hard. Not whoever proves himself. Not whoever prays the most. Whoever believes.

It’s that simple.

Really? Yes, really. The Israelites didn’t have to know how exactly the poison’s effect was counteracted when they looked up. It just was.

You don’t have to know exactly how it works either.

To paraphrase A.W. Tozer, we’re saved by His death, but how are we saved by His death? We’re alive by His resurrection, but how are we alive by His resurrection? At some point it’s just a miracle. Unfathomable. And we simply stand and gaze at the cross and whisper, “Thank you.”

The Apostle Paul seems to be paraphrasing John 3:16 when he says,

*But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.* Romans 5:8

This is the invasion God had been planning for millennia, the incident all history had been building to. God chose a moment in time to enter our world physically.

Not merely to teach or punish or model. But to save.

And God did it all because He “loved the world so much…”

God is… the One who loves the world.

### Questions For Reflection

How does this chapter expand your understanding of John 3:16?

I presume there were people back in Numbers 21 who refused to look at the bronze snake to be healed, because the Bible talks about those who died. In their pride they refused the grace that could have been theirs. Why would people do that? Do you ever see that tendency in yourself?

I encourage you to look to Jesus Christ as your Savior. Thank Him for His love. If you have already received this gift, pray that others may receive Christ through this study of God’s attributes.

Day 25

## What God Feels for Me

Read your Bible: [1 John 4:7–19](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+4%3A7-19&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty Savior. He will rejoice over you with great gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will exult over you by singing a happy song.* [Zephaniah 3:17](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zephaniah+3%3A17&version=NIV)

We forget so quickly that we are God’s beloved children and allow the many curses of our world to darken our hearts. Therefore we have to be reminded of our belovedness and remind others of theirs.
— Henri Nouwen

How does the majestic, omnipotent, holy God feel about you?

Ever wonder about that? Do you suspect He feels disgust or regret or loathing? Look at the verbs in today’s spotlight verse.

God rejoices over you. God calms you. God exults (that means He takes delight, like a proud Father) over you. Godsings about you. And it’s a happy song, not a dirge!

Right now, try to picture someone who makes you happy. Imagine their eyes, their touch, their laugh. Just thinking about them makes you smile. And that is how God feels about you!

### Caught Up in the Raptures of Love

Paddy Chayefsky wrote a play about a man named Gideon. In one scene Gideon is in the desert feeling rejected and lonely, but at night God breaks into Gideon’s tent and overwhelms him with love.

And Gideon cries out in his Brooklyn accent:

“God, oh God, all night long I’ve thought of nuttin’ but You, nuttin’ but You. I’m caught up in the raptures of love, God! I wanna take you into my tent, wrap you up, and keep you… God, hey God, tell me that You love me!”

“I love you, Gideon,” God answers.

“Yeah! Tell me again, God.”

“I love you, Gideon.”

Gideon scratches his head. “I don’t understand. Why? Why do you love me?”

And God says, “I hardly know why myself.”

That line always gets a laugh from the audience watching the play. But the next line tugs the heart. God says, “But then passion is an unreasonable thing.”[44](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n44)

God’s passion for you and for me really is unreasonable in the sense that cannot be explained by reason. It is rooted not in reason but in the truth that God is love. (1 John 4:8)

And that includes the joy, the songs, the compassion, the hard choices and sacrifices of real love. We love because He first loved us. Amazingly, when I’m enraptured by God’s love I am only mirroring what He feels for me!

### What God Calls Me

Another place God’s feelings about you are revealed: His terms of endearment for you. Did you know that God calls you His “Beloved”?

The Bible says you are:

*…the elect of God, holy and beloved…*Colossians 3:12 (KJV)

*…****beloved****of the Lord.*2 Thessalonians 2:13 (KJV)

“Beloved.” It’s a word used most frequently in the old King James Version. And to my mind it’s a better word than the more modern yet curiously formal-sounding “well loved” or “dear friends” in newer translations.

What’s more, Jesus tells the church in Revelation that, in the new heaven and new earth, we’ll get a name change!

When I was a kid hearing schoolyard taunts about my name, “René Schlaepfer,” this was one of the aspects of heaven I looked forward to the most! I can’t tell you how many times I heard, “René? That’s a girl’s name!” or “Shlepping around again, eh, Schlaepfer?” or “Hey, Shleprock!” A new name? Yes!

Maybe you were called something on the playground, or at home, that was a put-down, too. And it stung: “Loser.” “Disappointment.” “Stoner.” “Rebel.” Maybe that even became a secret, internal name that, in your mind, partly defines you, even as an adult.

Now look how God changes your name in this heavenly scene:

*I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem…*Revelation 3:12

So — I get the name of a city? Wow. “Glad to meet you, I’m Jerusalem Schlaepfer.” Not much of an improvement. But wait. What is the name of the city of God?

God reveals it to Isaiah:

*Never again will you be called “The Forsaken City” or “The Desolate Land.” Your****new name****will be “The City of God’s Delight” and “The Bride of God,” for the lord delights in you and will claim you as his bride.* Isaiah 62:4 (NLT)

Do you ever feel as if you could be nicknamed, “Forsaken…”; “Desolate…”?

Well, there’s a name change in store. And one of your new forever names as part of God’s people will be “God’s Delight.” Sounds like a pet name someone gives their closest loved one.

And that’s exactly what it is.

The God of all power cherishes you, treasures you. Delights in you. Don’t try to say it doesn’t make sense. Passion is unreasonable.

Try this: Say “I am God’s beloved!” out loud. Go ahead. Now try “I am God’s delight!”

Did you say those names with a sarcastic snicker or a hesitant whisper? That’s probably a sign that the concept of God’s love still needs to seep down into your soul.

And letting it seep in really makes a difference:

*Let the****beloved****of the lord****rest secure****in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the lord loves****rests****between his shoulders.* Deuteronomy 33:12

*He gives His****beloved sleep****.* Psalm 127:2 (KJV)

*…****beloved****of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and****peace from God****our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Romans 1:7 (KJV)

How does that move you?

God is… the One who calls you Beloved.

### Questions For Reflection

Is it easy or difficult for you to say “I am God’s Beloved Child!” out loud? Why?

What difference do you think it would make to say or think this throughout a normal day, and really believe it?

How does it make you feel to read Zephaniah 3:17?

Are there people you know who need to know this truth? How can you help them?

Ask yourself: Have I thanked God for His love to me today?

Have I shown love to someone today?

Day 26

## Candle in the Wind?

Read your Bible: [Ephesians 3:14–19](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+3%3A14-19&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ…* [Ephesians 3:17b–18](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+3%3A17b-18&version=NIV" \o "Look up Ephesians 3:17b–18 on BibleGateway)

Arthur Miller, the famous playwright, wrote about what it was like being married to Marilyn Monroe. During the filming of her last movie, The Misfits, he watched her sink into an abyss of depression. One night she convinced a doctor to give her yet another tranquilizer injection.

Miller stood watching his wife as she slept:

I found myself imagining… what if she were to wake and I were able to look at her in the eyes and say, “God loves you, darling!” and what if she were able to believe it! How I wish I still had my religion and she hers.[45](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n45)

Paul prays something like Miller’s unsaid prayer for Marilyn in today’s verses:

*I pray that you… may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ…*

Paul uses a great phrase to express that: The width, length, height, and depth of God’s love! Here’s one way to meditate on that:

The width of that love?

It takes in all your sin, all your failures, all your mistakes and regrets. All your weaknesses, all your loneliness, all your insecurities. It’s wide enough to draw a circle around all of that.

The length?

His love lasts forever. He has loved you from before the creation of the world. And nothing you could ever do could get God to stop loving you.

Now think of the heights from which He came.

Our earth is just a little speck of dust in the universe: If you could travel at the speed of light, you’d shoot past the moon in a second and a half. It would take you four years to get to the nearest star. Ten thousand years to get out of our galaxy. Two million years to reach the next closest galaxy, Andromeda. And how many galaxies are there? Billions. And the Bible says our God is enthroned far above the universe.

Now think of the depths to which He came to show His love.

That same God came from those heights to become… a fetus. If you’d had the technology back then, you could have taken an ultra-sound of Him. And that baby became a man who absorbed the sins of the world on the cross. And He went deeper still. He went to the depths of hell… for you. Because He loves you.

He loves you.

Can I play the role for you that Arthur Miller wished he could have played for Marilyn? If you were here with me now, I would look you in the eye and tell you:

God loves you.

You are passionately loved by the powerful God!

Maybe your whole life you’ve felt like an outsider. You’ve been abandoned. You’ve been burned. You’ve wanted love. And even when you received love it wasn’t satisfying.

God loves you more than you have ever loved anything or anyone. It’s His love you’ve been looking for all your life.

Believe that… and it changes everything.

### Loved and Secure

Yesterday I visited a man from our church in the local Veteran’s Administration Hospital. He fought in Viet Nam, but now he’s fighting for his life. He has an aggressive cancer that has already robbed him of his ability to swallow and to speak. To communicate, he writes his thoughts down on a tablet of paper.

At the end of our visit I prayed for Him. I prayed for a cure, for a miracle — and that he would sense God’s presence through this valley of the shadow of death so that he would not be afraid.

After I said, “Amen,” he grabbed his pen and paper and vigorously wrote in large letters, “I AM NOT AFRAID! PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT ALL FEAR!”

I looked into his eyes and saw his smile and I knew it was true.

He wrote some more: “We all have to go sometime. I am at perfect peace because I trust God implicitly.”

He was rooted. He was established. In the love of God.

That man was no trembling candle in the wind. He has confidence in God, who makes him an eternal flame.

We’ve focused so far on the mighty attributes of God a lot in this study — His omnipotence, majesty, holiness… But remember, as infinitely powerful as God is, He is just as infinitely loving.

His power is a loving power. His love is a powerful love.

God is… perfect in power and perfect in love!

### Questions For Reflection

Why do you think most people struggle with really believing God loves them?

What specific difference do you think it would make if you strengthened your belief that God has steadfast, never-ending love toward you?

Ask yourself: Have I thanked God for His love to me today?

Have I shown love to someone today?

Day 27

## God With Skin On

Read your Bible: [1 John 3:11–18](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+3%3A11-18&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.* [1 John 3:17–18](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+3%3A17-18&version=NIV)

What can the world do to a man or woman who is grounded in the love of God, who swims in the ocean of His love as a fish in the mighty sea? What can sin do? What can the world do? What can accident do? — A.W. Tozer

In a famous essay, the surgeon Richard Selzer describes a scene that he says he will never forget:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, so greedily? The young woman speaks.

“Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.

“I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.[46](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n46)

When he calls the man a god, he means he is acting God-like. In the incarnation, God became like us — twisting His own lips — to show His love. His love did not remain merely an emotion; it was put into motion.

One night a young mother was comforting her preschool aged daughter during a thunderstorm. “Go back to bed, sweetheart,” she said. And she heard the response every parent has heard from a frightened child: “I want you to be with me.”

“Go to bed,” said the mother, “God is with you.”

“I know He is,” replied the little girl, “But I want someone with skin on.”

In Jesus, God put skin on. He adjusts his kiss to love the human race.

### Loving As God Loves

And now God asks you and me to love others as He loves us. To go the distance to those in need and show love, not merely feel love. To express God’s love, not just experience God’s love.

*No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us.*1 John 4:12

How do you do that? I think of people in the church I serve. Their examples could fill another book.

I think of Mary, who despite her own health struggles coordinates a team of volunteers to visit men and women in nursing homes, hold weekly worship services, throw parties, and simply love them.

I think of Jack, who in his retirement has plunged into our food pantry ministry, each week leading a team that gives out bags of groceries for free to whoever’s hungry.

I could tell you about divorce recovery workshops, medical and dental teams that journey to villages in India and Africa, volunteers washing the feet of the homeless, an entire team that cooks food for shut-ins, grief support groups, teenagers who help at the Rescue Mission downtown, pregnancy resource centers for frightened and often unemployed women, guys who give up two weekends every month to be dads to kids without dads, mechanics who give up their Saturdays to do free car repair for widows and the elderly, and much, much more… all just in our church.

And the scene at our church is repeated across our county and state and nation and world.

I know, the problems seem so big. But remember: there’s a whole Body out there. You are one part. What is God calling you to do?

### My Passion

My own heart has been captured by feeding the hungry.

Why? For one thing, it’s specifically mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible as a concern of God.

Like in Isaiah 58, where God criticizes the people for having nice religious services but no real ministry. One example He specifically gives: “I want you to share your food with the hungry…” (Isaiah 58:7a)

Or in the parable of the sheep and goats, where Jesus tells the sheep that they fed Him when He was hungry. They’re confused. When did they ever feed Jesus? He answers that it was when they fed “the least of these.”

Why would God place such an emphasis on feeding the hungry?

Because hunger is tied into almost every single scourge of society.

Check out these facts:

* Even mild under-nutrition can lead to reduced body and brain development.
* Kids without adequate food are more likely to get sick. And have a much higher risk of later developing diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and many other illnesses.
* Kids without enough food are more likely to repeat a grade.
* Hunger in childhood is the most consistent predictor of learning problems and criminal behavior later in life.
* Hunger in childhood is also the most consistent predictor of job problems and income insecurity later in life.[47](http://godis.tlc.org/endnotes#n47)

So: Crime, learning problems, job problems, bad health, are all tied into hunger in childhood. This is all from recent research, but of course God already knew this!

By one count, over 200 times in the Bible He says, “Feed the hungry!”

I don’t know about you, but if God says to do something 200 times, I’m doing it.

And it costs so little. I encourage you to get involved with your church food pantry ministry, or with a local food bank.

### When You Care You Get to Share

One beneficial side effect of loving in incarnational ways:

When people see Christ-followers loving others, they are interested in what we have to say. As our church has raised its profile through food ministry and other community outreaches, I have had amazing chances to share God’s love with people ranging from homeless men to mayors of cities and CEOs. When you care, you get chances to share.

God is… calling you to love like He loves!

### Questions For Reflection

In 1 John 3:11–18, what does the Bible say about those who claim to love God?

What are some practical ways you can love with actions and truth, and not just words, this week?

Ask yourself the following questions: Have I thanked God for His love for me today?

Have I shown love to someone today?

Day 28

## Distracted from Him by It

Read your Bible: [Mark 7:1–7](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7%3A1-7&version=NIV)

Spotlight Verse:

*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* [Mark 7:7a](http://mobile.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7%3A7a&version=NIV)

“I tried Christianity and it doesn’t work.”

“I don’t know how to do it.”

“It’s too hard.”

I listened as the man unloaded his frustrations in my office. Then I wrote down those phrases on a piece of paper as he watched.

“Look at the sentences you’ve been repeating,” I told him. “What’s the most common word here?”

He looked at the paper and answered: “It.”

“There’s your trouble,” I said, paraphrasing David Seamands, one of my favorite Bible teachers and a man who’d helped me through my own struggles with legalism. “The Christian life is not an ‘it.’ The Christian life is Christ: A real relationship with God!”

In today’s passage Mark describes how meticulously the religious leaders of his day observed their traditions. They were very religious. But Jesus quotes Isaiah and says,

*Their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.* Matthew 15:8b, 9

They were distracted from Him by It. Focused on the religion, not the relationship.

It’s the same criticism Christ makes later of the Ephesian Christians. He tells them He has seen their good deeds, their hard work, their high standards, how they cannot even tolerate any wicked people…

*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.* Revelation 2:4

Very religious. No relationship.

That’s why, when asked by religious leaders to name the greatest commandment, Jesus answers:

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* Matthew 22:37–40

For God it’s all about love.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ”Please don’t let this study turn into an autopsy of God, a lifeless examination of words about Him. Love Him with your mind… and your heart and soul. Let revelation reignite that first love for God. As you learn more of what the Bible says, let it add to the mystery and the awe-inspired love, instead of subtract.

“This is the first and greatest commandment.” Jesus says all the other commands follow it. That’s because the only effective way for people to change their behavior is not for them to try hard to change their behavior. People change when they fall in love.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” When I love God because I see that He loves me first, I want to love others in practical, life-changing ways, precisely the way God loves me.

At our church a woman named Lisa makes gift baskets for disabled veterans. One Valentine’s Day she put together packages full of donated gifts for female vets recovering from horrible trauma — and tucked this letter inside each one:

Hi, my name is Lisa. I haven’t served our country (I cannot thank you enough for that) but I have had more than my share of unenviable experiences. I grew up in chaos and then found the same in my adult life. I have countless exterior scars and far deeper ones on my soul… But I have found healing and wholeness from God himself!

These baskets have a ton of love in them; your cards were made by the children — and signed by the members of Twin Lakes.

You have to know how much you’re loved —and especially how special and precious you are to God… I really do hope you enjoy them and the dinner; you are beautiful and cherished!

When you know how beautiful and cherished and precious and special and loved you are to God, your heart overflows with love for Him and for others!

God is… not an It.

### Questions For Reflection

Do you ever get distracted from Him by “It”? How?

Ask yourself: Have I thanked God for His love to you today?

Have I shown love to someone today?

Be ready to share with others how God’s love has overflowed in your life this week — perhaps in moments of pure worship or insight, or in opportunities to show practical acts of love to others!