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Chapter 1



TRAVELS THROUGH THE GARDEN: COMING TO LOVE CHRIST

“In the beginning, God . . .”

And thus begins the sweeping and true drama we know as Scripture. Within those opening words of Genesis 1:1 rings the truth that God is there, where all things we know find their beginning. He was there before the earth blinked into existence and He will be there when it is no more. He is present when the earth is without its present form. He creates light prior to the existence of the sun. He sets earthly time into motion before the first timepiece enters the mind of man. He creates birds and fish and mammals of such beauty that no one could fathom. This new world showcases the beauty of God’s holiness. And in each moment of creation, God deems it as “good” (see Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).

And then comes man. In the midst of the sixth day, God

makes the choice that we would come into existence. He endows man with His own image. The mystery of God's own character or face or type placed into us is beyond our ability to dream. Then, the authority to rule is handed over to this one man. It is not given to the lion or the gorilla. Not the behemoth nor the leviathan. No living creature is to rule except Adam. He alone is given the rights and privileges normally afforded to sovereignty.

In my mind's eye, I picture what it must have been to be the first of our race. Adam and his helpmate Eve experience a shameless life of love for one another. As companions to one another, theirs is a kind rulership over the creatures of earth. Joy, peace, and laughter are the totality of life together. There is no sin as they walk with God.

Into the garden of Eden God placed man and woman. And that would be enough. That God designed and created such a place of wonder and beauty filled with fascinating creatures and plant life is enough for man to know that his Creator cares for them. The anointing of man and woman as stewards of the earth assures them that the Lord has trusted them. Perfect provision given to Adam and Eve shows that God cares for them.

In addition to all that is given to them, God adds the greatest gift of all—His presence. He comes and grants to them His friendship as He walks with them during the cool of the day (3:8). It is within the realm of possibility that God would be too busy for these fragile creations, man and woman. After all, He has the entirety of heaven, all of the universe, and things beyond comprehension to rule. And yet God's love is so deep that He comes to the man and woman for lazy afternoon strolls.

GOD'S PURSUIT OF US

The story of creation seamlessly moves into the story of God's intimate pursuit of relationship with man, woman, and their descendants. After sin enters the picture by the choice of Adam and Eve, we find ourselves marred from birth by our sin nature and relationally separated from God by our own choices to sin. Yet we find ourselves under the missionary gaze of God. In a move that would seem to be contrary to all we deserve, God comes to find us. Both in the garden of Eden and in our everyday living, God calls to us, "Where are you?" He does not ask because somehow He has lost track of us. Rather, He wants us to realize that we have become a far-from-God people. We need to realize that "Aslan is on the move" (as C. S. Lewis wrote¹) to rescue us from our sin and ourselves.

And why is this? Why would the Creator look for man and woman while they hid in shame? Why does the Potter even concern Himself with clay that resists proper molding? Why does Christ, the Bridegroom, today seek out such a decadent bride? Why?

Love. Love is the answer. Love is what our God extends to us. It is a love relationship that transcends our shackles of sin and self-dependence. God chooses us out of His pure love. In that love, He displays His glory. His very character is that of love. In the midst of His pure justice, He shows love and mercy. When He chooses Abram, it is a choice of love; not based on worthiness. At the time of Israel's unfaithfulness, His love springs forth as He sends judges and prophets to call the "apple of His eye" back to Him.

LOVE'S ARRIVAL

And then comes the Christ. The gospel of Mark records Jesus' first proclamation in ministry as this call: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!" (1:15). As Jesus arrives on the earth, He comes to bring with Him the kingdom. He heralds the good news. He comes bearing the light. And the greatest part of this gospel message is that He is the King of the kingdom, He is the good news, and He is the light of the world. He has come to extend a love to fallen man. Redemption is drawing near. Life is arriving as if it were the dawn of a new day. Let the nations rejoice and all mankind be glad!

So when salvation arrives at our doorstep, a choice is made. We find the gospel illumined in such manner that its truth cannot be denied. Our hearts burn with conviction from the Spirit, and we surrender to Christ. It is the turning point of eternity for every person who chooses the Son as Savior. Redemption arrives. God the Judge is Christ the Savior, and the Spirit is the Comforter who crosses the great chasm in order to catch away the breath of the new bride.

And it is for the glory of His love that we are to return this love. As we consider the great love of the Father, there is no other response that is worthy of the life-giving King of all things. Our thirst and hunger for meaning, purpose, and destiny must suddenly fall away. The Father has sent the Son to die for the sin of man. Lovingly, He has lavished grace upon those who will believe. And now we must respond.

I gave my response many years ago. Kneeling beside the brown sofa in my childhood home, I listened as my father led me to the throne of the King, to whom I was an enemy yet

He was calling me to salvation. On that Sunday morning in 1977, Dad helped me to see that there was a love beyond my young imagination. As the years have progressed, I have come to know that imagination is not necessary. Instead, this love is rooted in such a deep reality that it can never be changed.

HOW WE RETURN GOD'S LOVE

God's love for me deserves the return gift of my own love. Of course, God's love extended to me deserves much more than any of us can give. And yet He requests our love. Love is to be the theme for our life in Him.

Even at the time of Simon Peter's reinstatement, Jesus speaks to him about a standard of love for his Lord. Jesus does not ask:

Simon, will you fast when I am gone?

Simon, will you pray a lot?

Simon, how will you handle money?

Simon, will you lead the coolest church in town?

Simon, will you fight injustice?

No. Instead Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Not once, but three times (John 21:15–17). For Christ, the focal point is love.

If we were in Peter's shoes, we would probably beg Christ, "What can I do to make this up to You? I will do anything to prove myself. Just tell me how." Perhaps that thought ran through Peter's mind. We often equate allegiance with actions. Christ would have us see love as the first form of relationship.

The entire reason for our relationship with Christ is love. It is not to try harder. That would insult the sufficient work of Christ for our salvation. It is not in seeking to earn His affection. That would negate His grace toward our sinfulness. Rather, Christ seeks us out as He did Peter on the shoreline of failure. And on that shore, He calls for our return to love.

FAKE SPIRITUALITY

I have often heard people use a “fake it till you make it” formula for following God. But you cannot fake love. This “fragile stone”² we know as Peter cannot fake it at this point. He has been brought too low. Yet many of us are still trying to fake a relationship of love when our hearts are full of rebellion. A spiritual life is something we desire, but our nature seems to fail in attaining it. So we lean on our family heritage of Christianity, religious practice, including church attendance, or a choice to be “spiritual, not religious.” It all sounds so good to the human ear. But it causes a gagging of divinity.

God is not calling you to promise greater allegiance through a disciplined life or living out a fake spirituality. He is asking you to love Him for who He is. We are not to love Him to find some nebulous meaning for life or to obtain personal comfort or physical well-being. God’s sole intent is that our lives will reflect His love.

In John 8, Jesus was speaking to the Jews who were claiming to be the rightful descendants of Abraham and therefore God’s chosen children. Jesus sought to correct them and to show them the true way. After rebuking them for their plot for His execution, He said to them, “If God were your Father, you

would love Me, because I came from God and I am here. For I didn't come on My own, but He sent Me" (v. 42). If they were in true relationship with the Father, they would naturally have a love for the Son.

THE COVENANT OF LOVE

A Bond That Is Unbreakable

Jesus assures us of His love in John 15, "As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love" (v. 9). He reiterates love as central to our relationship. Just as Christ calls for our love, He assures of His love. Love is the covenant that cannot be broken.

O. Palmer Robertson gives a great definition for a covenant: a "bond in blood sovereignly administered."³ Think about those three elements: It is (1) *a bond* (2) *fixed in blood* that (3) *is sovereignly administered*. First, as *a bond* this covenant has bound believers to Christ because of His work. It is not our work. As Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8–9 NIV). The covenant of love by which we have been captured is solely the work of Christ. If it were by my works, I could easily walk away or fall away because my work is captured by the temporal world of corrosion. But because it is the work done by the eternal Lord, it is a binding that not even hell itself can break, much less my own sinful choices.

Fixed by Blood

Second, a covenant is fixed *in blood*. The covenant we have with Christ is one sealed with His blood, the very life force of the body. When Adam and Eve sinned, an animal was slain so their naked bodies could be covered. The sacrificial system for God's people in the Old Testament was that blood be spilled for sin to be covered. Hebrews 9:22 states that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Our only defense and hope is the blood of Christ. It brings peace and righteousness to hopeless men and women. It washes us clean and sings grace over our lives. It is only by the blood of Christ that we can possibly enter into the holy place with God. It is by His blood that we are his people. As Paul reminds us, "The church of God [is] bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28b NIV). We are a people connected by the shedding of blood by Jesus.

In 2005, I worked with some friends to plant a church. On our launch Sunday, we began a series of messages through the book of Ephesians—not a very common choice when launching a church in an area that is over 60 percent unchurched. On the first Sunday, we used Ephesians 1:7–14 to teach them of "God's Purpose for You." It was important to us that the first point of the first sermon for this new church would be about the blood of Christ. Verse 7 (NIV) reads, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

The temptation was to choose some innocuous series with every sermon being five steps to successful marriage, parenting, work life, or owning a dog. But the blood of Christ is too important to relegate to some future date. It is only with sacrifice that we can come into a relationship with God.

Administered by a Sovereign God

Third, a covenant *is sovereignly administered*. It is not for the creature to determine how we will relate to the Creator. Americans love to talk about our rights. We debate them, fight for them, and elect leaders who will protect them. But in this relationship, God has all the rights and we lay ourselves at His merciful right hand. Does this sound a bit one-sided to you? It is not. Whereas God could constantly pummel us with our sin, He chooses to administrate the covenant with love as the essence of relationship. But we must never lose sight of who exactly is in charge. The Scripture teaches that we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). He loves us first, He chooses us, He rescues us, He seals us, and He sustains us. God alone has the right to direct our relationship. In return, He asks for our love.

As the central discipline of the Christian life, love is what propels habitual holiness and the desire to follow God into the world for His redeeming mission. Internal transformation (founded in our love for Christ) manifests itself in external action (Bible reading, fellowship, prayer, serving, giving, etc.). It doesn't work the other way around. Performing the (external) spiritual disciplines without a true (internal) love for Christ looks a lot like the Pharisees in action.

We need to be called back to living out of love for Christ and not a self-serving motivation of becoming a better spiritual person. The greatest discipline is love. All of the other disciplines flow from that love. As we love deeply, our lives will be separated for His holy purposes. The more often we hold up love, the more habitual our holiness will become.

HOW LOVE CAN SPRING FORTH

When I finished reading *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, I just sat quietly for a while. It was the first time I read a book about spiritual disciplines for someone living in the modern era. Granted, with Foster being a Quaker, I differ with him on a number of theological positions. But his desire to enjoy intimacy with Christ was a refreshing challenge. Then I encountered *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard and my spiritual life was turned on its head. I did not have to be a Quaker or a monk to practice the disciplines. I could be an evangelical and not keep my head in a book all the time. Next I read Brother Lawrence's little book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In his desire to commune with God at all times I realized how shallow my life had often become.

On one occasion I met Avery Willis, a man whose life in Christ was consumed with a passionate love that shamed me. An ongoing friendship I enjoy with Henry Blackaby constantly bears out how clearly we can know the will of God if we would only allow our love for Him to rule every facet, moment, and arena of life. Serving with friends in the church consistently rewards me with the chance to see how an intense love for Christ will propel me into a missional life that will seek the reign of God over our community. With love as the central discipline of Christian living, all other practices are welcomed as dear friends rather than toilsome acquaintances.

At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves who we want to become. For my part, I want to be like Christ. If only His character and love could flow into me, then I would truly understand the heart of the Father. But I am just a novice. Thomas

Merton once said, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life.”⁴ So let us begin again. Come with me to discover how love can spring forth through obeying the commands of Christ. Come with me to leave the desert-dwelling and dance on dark mountain peaks. Come and train your attention on the relationship of love He has for us rather than the multitude of distracting environments of this distressing world. Come back to the garden with me.