

Experiencing God's Love

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You are loved.

Deeply engrained within you is the need to experience love. You need to love others as well as to receive their love. Experiencing love is not optional; it's an essential part of life. If you try to go through life without experiencing love, your life will eventually begin to show the signs that something significant is missing within. Life without love isn't really life at all. Yet, no matter how little love you are experiencing right now, hope is closer than you may think. You can experience love and that journey can begin today.

The God with powers beyond our wildest dreams delights in you, loving you more passionately than the most devoted mother or proudest father or grandparent, and more than any starry-eyed lover has ever loved. Few of us doubt that God can do amazing things. The weak link in our faith is believing that God would do such things for ordinary, inconsequential you and me.

If we could grasp the enormity of God's love for us, our faith would sky-rocket. When you feel like a tiny blob in the seething mass of humanity, see the shepherd of a hundred sheep frantically searching for one. If he can be personally concerned for one, the omnipotent Shepherd of our souls can love all humanity and still be devoted to you. In the beautiful words of Isaiah, 'As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you' (Isaiah 62:5).

Love is typically understood to be a feeling of euphoria that brings a sense of well-being. However, biblically, love is the concern and action that seeks the best for others. The nature of love is to give. It is "other" focused. In order to experience God's love, we should look for God's actions that are directed at our well being.

Here are some reminders from the Bible to help you come to experience God's love.

God is love.

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him. (1 John 1:16)

God loves the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

God love us.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know it is that it did not know him. (1 John 3:1)

How can you know that God loves you?

1. God "demonstrates" his love by sending Christ to die for us.

According to the Bible, the essence of love is giving. The degree of love is measured partly by the costliness of the gift to the giver, and partly by the unworthiness of the recipient. The greater the chasm between these two, the greater the demonstration of love. You can know God loves

you, because God has given his Son for you.

The greatest example of the experience of God's love is in the person of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins. God loves us so much that he took our place on the cross and died for us. Jesus said in John 15:13 that the greatest act of love is to lay your life down for another. This is exactly what Jesus did for us.

2. God "pours out" his love within our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

God soaks our parched hearts with his love through this work of his Spirit. One of the Holy Spirit's main roles is to "make us deeply and refreshingly aware that God loves us."

God does this for everyone, not just for a few, privileged super-saints. God is ready and waiting to pour out his love within your heart, if you will only open the door of your heart and invite Christ in.

What will you experience?

Some people experience a dramatic sense of joy. Others experience a profound sense of relief and cleansing. Others experience a subtle but deep sense that they have made the right decision. If all believers had the same experience of the love of God, Paul would not have prayed for the Ephesians that they "*be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge*" (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Consider 1 Peter 1:8, "*Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.*" Here is an experience of great and inexpressible joy. Joy beyond words. It is not based on a physical seeing of Christ. But it is based on believing in Christ. Christ is the focus and content of the mind in this inexpressible joy.

Similarly, Romans 15:13 says that the God of hope fills us with joy and peace "in believing." And believing has content. The love of God is experienced in knowing and believing Christ because, as Romans 8:39 says the love of God is "in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing will be able to separate us "*from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Rooted and grounded in love.

God is love, and all love comes from God. Ephesians 3:16-17 says, "*I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are **being rooted and grounded in love.***" This means that as we accept the gift of salvation and its basis in God's great love for us, we receive the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit secures in us the assurance of God's love. When we seek God's love in its fullness, we experience that love as the basis for any and all love that we express to others.

Comprehend and know the love of Christ.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27, cf. Matthew 22:37 and Mark 12:30). As we strive to comprehend the

breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ for us, our love for God and for others will continue to grow.

Our goal is to be so filled up with Christ that there is no room for anything besides Him. There is no other object or person that would catch our heart's attention. We would be so enraptured with His love that we would be "filled up to all the fullness of God." Even though you are totally forgiven, you still need to deal with your sins on a day-to-day basis in order to experience continuing fellowship with God. First John 1:9 says, *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

Confession involves agreeing with God about our sin. When God brings to your attention that something you have done is sin, confess it. By turning back to God and away from your sin (repentance), you will experience His love and forgiveness provided by Christ's death on the cross. Instead of feeling guilty or condemned, you can know that your fellowship with God is restored.

So, to experience God's love is first of all to trust him by faith, to trust in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on our behalf. By trusting in Jesus, by looking to Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins through his death, burial, and resurrection, you can then receive the forgiveness of God and experience his love for us.

Experience the presence of God.

There is, however, another way of experiencing God's love. All across the world Christians have had times when they have "sensed" the presence of God in a very real and powerful way. Since God is love (1 John 4:8), to experience his presence is to experience his love. This experience is often humbling and serves to reveal our own sinful natures, because when we are in the presence of love and holiness, we are "undone" and we see ourselves as we really are. This experience may both bring us to tears and engulf us in his divine presence.

God's love has no strings attached.

God's love has no "if" clause ("I will love you if you please me" or "I will love you if I feel like it"). God's love is not a smothering love ("I love you because you make me feel good"). And God's love is not a controlling love ("I love you because you are my property"). God simply loves us—unconditionally, eternally.

God wants us even more than we want God.

In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus compares God to the father who unashamedly hitches up his garment and runs to meet the lost son. Jesus says that while the son was still a long way off, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). We may find this illustration of God's affection too intimate, too threatening. But God invites us to come a little closer and to experience God's compassion.

God is more gracious to us than we are toward ourselves.

We have high expectations of ourselves, and we tend to judge ourselves harshly. We fear failure, we reprimand ourselves when we fail, and we might even punish ourselves for failing. But God

knows our limits even better than we do. And when we fail, God does not scold us or shame us. God always has grace for us, no matter how many times we fail.

God is trustworthy.

God never gives up on us, never rejects us, never leaves us. These things are especially difficult for us to believe if we didn't grow up in an environment of trust. But God understands our mistrust and invites us to discover, through experience, how trustworthy God is.

God delights in giving to us.

It's God's nature to give. Unfortunately, most of us aren't very good at receiving. We find it hard even to receive from God, unless it's mainly for the purpose of serving someone else. But when we slow down, pay attention to what God might be doing in us and around us, and receive the good gifts God is offering us—especially God's love for us—we become healthier human beings. We become human beings who know we're loved. And then we're prepared to serve others out of love.

We can tell God exactly how we feel.

God can handle our doubts, our fears, our anger, our disappointment, our anxiety, our sadness. Unlike some people we may have known and trusted, God doesn't turn away from us or tell us to go away until we get a better attitude. Instead, God invites us to share all our feelings with him, including the unpleasant ones. If we find this hard to do, we can browse the Psalms for helpful scripts. Psalms 13, 31, and 69 are good examples, and there are many more.

God wants to heal our wounds.

God is always patient. While we may want our emotional wounds to be healed, we may avoid the healing process. We fear the pain we'll experience as we expose wounds that we buried long ago, or we fear God's responses to those wounds. However, God understands all our fears. And as we take them to God, one fear at a time, God slowly and thoroughly drives out our fears while healing our wounds.

The Bible is full of stories about how people have experienced a loving God. And the Bible is full of invitations for us to experience this God. Fortunately for us, God does most of the work. Our part is to ask God to make us willing to have our wounds and fears revealed to us so that God can heal us. Our part is to ask for eyes to see and a heart to receive God's loving gifts to us each day so that we can experience and truly know this One who loves each of us beyond the telling.

How can you come to experience God's love?

There is no magic formula for experiencing God's love, but there are some spiritual practices that will help you.

1. Pray.

Open up your heart to God in Christ Jesus. Share your sin and brokenness, and your desire for healing and wholeness. Daily prayer is an important part of experiencing God. Ask for God to increase your awareness of his presence with you and his activity in the world around you. Watch and listen for God's leading and movement in your life.

2. Read the Bible.

Every growing Christian has a reading plan for their Bible study. Remember that “reading” can also mean listening to an audio Bible on your computer, CD or MP3 player. A number of options are available. If you have not yet read through the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), this is a great place to begin. Don’t be in a rush to get through. Take time to focus on the meaning of each story and how it can be applied to your life.

If you have already read through the four Gospels, a next step might be to find a good study or devotional guide to use in working through a specific book of the Bible or a topic of interest to you. I highly recommend using a resource that provides a reading for each day, as this encourages you to read everyday.

3. Don’t go it alone.

Find a mentor, a study group or an accountability partner. It is much easier to grow spiritually when you have the encouragement and guidance of someone else. When you regularly meet with someone who asks you what you are learning and how you are applying it, you get into a habit of study and reflection that keep God at the center of your focus.

4. Find a place of service.

The very best way to grow your understanding of God’s love is to live it. There are countless places, both inside and outside the church, where believers can actively show their love of God and neighbor. You don’t have to preach to be in ministry with others. If you have not identified your spiritual gifts, begin a self-assessment to determine how God has equipped you to serve in the world. Then find a place where you can use your gifts to God’s glory. Serving God in the world offers one of the best ways to experience God’s love in your own life.

Your personal plan for experiencing God's love.

Take a few moments to develop a plan for drawing nearer to God in Christ as means for having a greater experience of God's love. Consider what specific spiritual practices you will begin or step up to help raise your awareness of God's loving presence. Here are a few options to consider. Select one or more for your focus over a period of thirty days. Then assess what progress you have made.

- ___ 1. Keep a gratitude journal. Every day make a list of the ways God has blessed you. Consider the small blessings as well as the big ones.

- ___ 2. Practice a daily examination of conscience in which you review your thoughts, words and actions each day to determine where you have fallen short. Watch for patterns of persistent sins, and work to eliminate them from your life.

- ___ 3. Practice forgiving others. Give special consideration to people who have mistreated you. Pray for them and for your interactions with them.

- ___ 4. Take a spiritual retreat (for a morning, a day, a weekend, a week) in which you focus on God's love for you. Read Scriptures about how God loves you and meditate on the experience of being surrounded by God's love.

- ___ 5. Improve your habits of healthy living, including: a) a diet low in salt and fat and rich in fruit and vegetables, and b) regular and adequate sleep and exercise.

- ___ 6. Practice self-denial through fasting or saving money to give to others in need.

- ___ 7. Spend time serving others in some new and regular way.



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