

Pause to pray

LOVE

Lord, You are the world's LOVE! God, we know that the "love of Christ compels us" to share the truth that One died for all, and we live for You and not ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:14).

We pray for local believers around the world to know Your love and show Your love even under harsh persecution. Please God, bear much fruit from their sacrifices of love. Amen.

LOVE CAME DOWN

“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”

JOHN 3:13

One of my favorite Christmas songs was written by Chris Eaton and sung by Point of Grace. It's called "When Love Came Down."

*So close your eyes and
share the dream*

Let everyone on earth believe

*The child was born, the
stars shone bright*

*And love came down at
Christmas time*

*What a fantastic dream that would
be — if everyone on earth believed!*

That is our dream as Christians, isn't it? Our joy, our privilege and our responsibility are to do everything we possibly can to let everyone on earth know a child was born — not just any child. Hear the word of the angel as the announcement was made to the shepherds on that first Christmas: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Love came down at Christmas time. "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" (John 3:16).

Why do we share our faith with people in our communities? Why do we send missionaries to the most remote places on earth to take the gospel to those we will never personally have a chance to meet? We do it for the very reason that God's love is so amazing. He is not willing that any should perish. This incredible love is the foundation of the commission Jesus has given us. It's what compels us to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

As we begin this final week of Advent

thinking about the love of God, let's be reminded that His love is tangible. It's personal. And it's available — not to some but all. "For God so loved the world!" He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Share your faith this Christmas season with the full confidence that God deeply loves the one you're talking with because, for that person, Love came down!



SACRIFICIAL LOVE

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

JOHN 15:13

It's fascinating that the first time the word "love" is mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis 22. There we read the account of Abraham offering his son to God as a sacrifice. God said to Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Genesis 22:2).

Abraham's heart was already broken at the loss of one son. His firstborn, Ishmael, was forced to

leave home because of a family feud. Now, only a few years later, it appears as though Abraham will lose Isaac too. Nevertheless, not understanding why God would make such an incomprehensible demand, Abraham acts in obedience.

You and I have the benefit of knowing how everything turned out. Abraham built an altar. He arranged the wood. He bound Isaac on the altar, and in an act of faith we can't completely fathom, he raised the knife and was about to plunge it into his son's chest. At that point, the angel of the Lord spoke to Abraham and said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not with-

held your son, your only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12). Instead, a ram, provided by God as a substitute, was sacrificed in Isaac's place.

Fast forward 2,000 years. On a mountain in the same mountain range where Abraham offered Isaac, another Father offered His Son as a sacrifice. This time, God did not stay the hand of the executioner. God the Father allowed His Son, Jesus, to die in agony and bloodshed on a cruel Roman cross. This is truly sacrificial love! "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

At Christmas, we think about the tiny newborn in the manger wrapped in

swaddling clothes. Those clothes were a foreshadowing of the grave clothes that would ultimately wrap the lifeless body of Christ after He was taken down from the cross. The love of God is so gigantic that He allowed His Son to take our place as a sacrifice for sin. You never have to ask the question, "Does God truly love me?" The answer is a resounding YES! "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Who do you know who needs to personally experience the love of God? Do something today to enable that person to hear the "good tidings of great joy!" (Luke 2:10).



LIVING LOVE

“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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

EPHESIANS 3:17-19

As you look back on your life, what are your earliest memories of experiencing love? Many are blessed to say they felt genuinely loved by their parents. Maybe it was a grandparent. Some knew the love of a special friend.

Others didn't experience authentic love until they were married.

I wonder how the Apostle Paul would answer that question if we were allowed to ask it. Is it possible the first time he saw true love in action was on a day when a man was murdered because of his commitment to Christ? This man I'm talking about is Stephen. On that day, when people were hurling rocks at Stephen, Paul (then Saul) held their coats so they could throw even harder.

I have to believe Paul never got over this experience. Maybe it was even flashing through his mind as he wrote the prayer in Ephesians 3 mentioned above. He prays that you and I would be "established in love." He longs for us to under-

stand "how wide and long and high and deep" the love of Christ is. Even though this love "surpasses knowledge," he still wants us to experience it.

He saw that kind of love radiating from Stephen on that day. In his dying breath, Stephen lifted up a prayer that is almost identical to the prayer Christ prayed from the cross, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

It's not difficult to love those who love you and treat you well. Anybody can do that. But Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. That's a different matter altogether. Yet, Jesus didn't just tell us to do it — He demonstrated it. His life was always characterized by love, even when the love wasn't reciprocated.

The rich young ruler couldn't commit when Christ told him what it would cost to follow Him.

Yet, even as the man was walking away, the Bible tells us clearly that Jesus loved him (Mark 10:21). With tears streaming down his cheeks, Jesus cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). And from the cross, Jesus prayed for those who were willing participants in His execution, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

How did Jesus love in the face of over-

whelming hostility? How did Stephen do it? The same way you and I are able to do it. "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). We can also live a life of love by simply allowing God's Spirit to love through us. We live in a brutal and hostile world. Yield yourself to Christ in a fresh way today so people will experience the love of God as they encounter you.



TRANSFORMING LOVE

*“You shall love the Lord
your God with all your
heart, with all your soul, and
with all your strength.”*

DEUTERONOMY 6:5

Do you ever get tired of being like you are? Do you ever look at your life and think, “I thought I’d be further along by now?” You’ve been a Christian for several years, and you can’t help but think, “I thought I’d be less like the world and more like Jesus by now.” Or “I thought I would have overcome more of my sinful struggles and habits by now.” Or “I thought I’d be more disciplined in my spiritual pursuits by now.”

Years ago, I heard a preacher say, “If you’re not walking with Christ, you don’t

have an obedience problem — you have a love problem.” That’s a hard pill for us to swallow, but I think it’s more true than we probably want to admit. As followers of Christ, we know when we’re out of fellowship with God. We know the difference between right and wrong. We know the difference between a life that honors God and a life that dishonors God. We use words like “should” and “ought.” For example, “I really should be doing this,” and “I really ought to stop doing that.”

I think the old preacher was probably right. Instead of concentrating on obedience (which might be behavior modification), we need to focus on love. After all, Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). It’s not difficult to spend time with

someone you love. Think of the things you're willing to sacrifice and give up; think of the lengths to which you will go to change your schedule or do whatever it takes to see somebody you love. Love doesn't ask, "What is the least I can do to get by?" Love always wants to do more. As a follower of Christ, love doesn't say, "What is the bottom line of obedience and commitment I can give to Jesus and still feel like I'm a decent Christian?" No, love looks for a way to go the second and third mile.

Let me interject some good news at this point. Jesus doesn't expect us to pull this off in our own power. He says to us, "If you love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15). But don't stop reading there. In the next sentence, He gives us the secret as to how

this can be accomplished. "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that he may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth ... for he dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:16–17).

God never tells us to do something without also giving us the power to do it. Paul says it so well in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."



FINDING LOVE

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

LUKE 2:11

My daughter and my grandson love to do puzzles, especially around Christmas time. They spend an incredible amount of time examining the tiny pieces and putting them into place. They have a cat named Milly, and like most cats, she's sneaky. She loves to slink around the table and chairs looking for an opportune time to paw away and steal pieces of their puzzle. Often, she gets away with her crimes. After days of hard work, they get down to the end and realize they are missing some pieces. The search begins. Finally, they find Milly's

stash of ill-gotten goods and recover the valuable piece or pieces. There is joy and satisfaction as they pop those pieces into place and gaze upon the whole picture, now complete.

The Bible talks about the great joy experienced when something is found. In His parables, Jesus talked about the joy of a shepherd finding a lost sheep, a woman finding a misplaced coin, a father finding a runaway son, a traveler finding a hidden treasure and a merchant finding a valuable pearl. Can you imagine the joy the shepherds experienced when they found Jesus in Bethlehem that first, wonderful Christmas night?

I found Jesus when I was eight years old. Or did Jesus find me? Sometimes we get those things confused. I know now that I love Him because He first loved

me (1 John 4:19). Yet, I can tell you that, even as a child, the significance of what happened changed my life forever! The amazing love and forgiveness of God overwhelmed me!

The angel gave specific directions to the shepherds that led them straight to Jesus. They found Him exactly as the angel said they would. Who do you know that needs directions today? Who can you lead to Jesus this Christmas? Share with them the wonderful news of the Savior. Furthermore, through your generous gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering[®], you can help someone on the other side of the world hear that same amazing gospel message!



LOVE WORTHY OF WORSHIP

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the book and to break its seals; for you were slain, and purchased for God with your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.’”

REVELATION 5:9

The nativity scenes we see and set up are very beautiful, but most are not chronologically correct. The wise men are nowhere to be found in Luke's account of the Christmas story. It was the shepherds who visited Jesus on the night of His birth. The wise men didn't show up in Bethlehem until several months later.

We read the account of their visit in the second chapter of Matthew.

We understand why the wise men weren't there on the actual night of Jesus' birth. They had a long journey to make. Most scholars believe the wise men came from Persia, a distance several hundred miles away from Judea. You and I are inspired when we pause long enough to consider the length of time and the difficulties these men must have experienced on their adventurous excursion. They had come to Jesus for a reason, and their purpose would not be thwarted. The Bible says, "And when they came into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him..." (Matthew 2:11). These men, strang-

ers to the land of Israel, are a powerful demonstration that the love of God is for all people, not just a select few.

Every person on earth worships something, but only Jesus is truly worthy of our worship. Andrew Peterson says it so well in his song, "Is He Worthy?"

Is anyone worthy? Is anyone whole?

*Is anyone able to break the
seal and open the scroll?*

*The Lion of Judah who
conquered the grave*

*He is David's root and the Lamb
who died to ransom the slave.*

From every people and tribe

Every nation and tongue

*He has made us a kingdom
and priests to God*

To reign with the Son!

Is He worthy? Is He worthy?

Of all blessing and honor and glory

Is He worthy? Is He worthy?

Is He worthy of this?

He is!

"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"
(Revelation 7:9–10)

