

A vertical strip of colorful stained glass is visible on the left edge of the cover, featuring various patterns and colors including blue, yellow, red, and green.

PRAYING
the
ATTRIBUTES
of
GOD

a daily guide to EXPERIENCING
HIS GREATNESS

ANN
SPANGLER

Bestselling author of *Praying the Names of God*

PRAYING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD



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Praying the Attributes of God: A Daily Guide to Experiencing His Greatness

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A CRASH COURSE ON GOD

Why It's Good to Learn about His Attributes

I long for God, not the works of God.

Clement of Alexandria

Imagine never being able to distinguish music from noise. Every song, every symphony, every note would sound garbled and unpleasant. You'd struggle to stifle your laughter when you saw friends making fools of themselves belting out the words to their favorite songs or gyrating across the dance floor to a melody you couldn't detect. And what about all the money spent downloading music or the time wasted listening to a bunch of disagreeable sounds strung together? Wouldn't it all seem rather bizarre?

That was Austin Chapman's perspective for nearly twenty-three years. Born deaf, Austin was at peace with his situation. "All music," he explains, "sounded like trash through my hearing aids." But that changed the day he tried on a new pair capable of distributing higher frequencies with greater clarity.

Suddenly the young filmmaker heard sounds he didn't even know existed—the scraping of his shoe on carpet, the clicking of a computer keyboard, the whir of a fan. That night, friends

decided to give him a crash course on music. He listened in amazement to Mozart, Elvis, Michael Jackson, and more.

“When Mozart’s ‘Lacrimosa’ came on,” Chapman says, “I was blown away by the beauty of it. At one point of the song, it sounded like angels singing and I suddenly realized that this was the first time I was able to appreciate music. Tears rolled down my face and I tried to hide it. . . . I finally understood the power of music.”¹

Chapman’s story reminds me of my first experience with God. Before that, most of what I’d heard about him sounded garbled and boring, a bit like trash coming through hearing aids. These bits of knowledge didn’t move me; instead, they left me feeling cold and a bit fearful. What little faith I had vanished shortly after I entered college. I did my best to make peace with my godless state as though it were completely natural, the only rational response to life.

But then God disarmed me. He surprised me by being real, by helping me see that the god I had rejected didn’t even exist. In truth, I hadn’t discarded God, but only a caricature formed by my own and others’ misperceptions. When the real God showed up, he changed my life. He upended my world. He blew my mind.

And he keeps doing it—surprising me, catching me off guard, shattering my false images of him. And that is true for most of us as we live out the Christian life. In our sanest moments, we realize that the most important thing we can do is to pursue God; to hound him, even; to prayerfully insist that he give us a clearer revelation of who he is, because by doing so, we are fulfilling the purpose for which he made us. It is in his presence that life and joy are to be found. All other things, the things that clamor for our worship and insist on our undivided attention, are revealed for what they are—beautiful trifles, which when compared to God seem merely like tinfoil reflections of his glory.

The Old Testament prophets knew about our susceptibility to

idols and to phony worship. Over and over they railed against idolatry, linking it to blindness. Listen to Isaiah describing those who worship idols:

Such stupidity and ignorance!
Their eyes are closed, and they cannot see.
Their minds are shut, and they cannot think.
The person who made the idol never stops to reflect,
“Why, it’s just a block of wood!
I burned half of it for heat
and used it to bake my bread and roast my meat.
How can the rest of it be a god?
Should I bow down to worship a piece of wood?”
The poor, deluded fool feeds on ashes.
He trusts something that can’t help him at all.
Yet he cannot bring himself to ask,
“Is this idol that I’m holding in my hand a lie?”

ISAIAH 44:18-20

Indeed, throughout Scripture, we see this link between God’s judgment and the dulling of our human senses.² Jesus, the one famous for opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, makes this link crystal clear:

“I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”

Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, “Are you saying we’re blind?”

“If you were blind, you wouldn’t be guilty,” Jesus replied. “But you remain guilty because you claim you can see.”

JOHN 9:39-41

If we want to see God more clearly, we have to be willing to let go of false images when we are given the grace to recognize them for what they are. Human vision, of course, is always impaired. Our deluded hearts mislead us. We see only to the extent that God graciously opens our eyes—the eyes of the blind.

Not long ago, while I was puzzling over the difficulties that bear down hard upon our lives—things like job loss, illness, financial pressure, relational conflict, and other maladies, it occurred to me that the emotional pain we feel as a result of our troubles is often magnified by a colossal misunderstanding—one common to the human race. This misunderstanding arises from our lack of vision. Most of the time, we don't clearly see ourselves or our circumstances or the God we love. As Paul says, we are always looking “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12, *KJV*). So our vision is to some extent blurred, limited, and confused, putting us into the foreground while everything else recedes to the background. Our fears, our aspirations, our troubles—these are the focal points that command our attention.

This pattern of distortion happens to everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike, even though God has revealed truths about himself that should untangle and upend our twisted views of what is really going on. Despite the fact that we now see God in the picture, we Christians, still plagued by selfishness and fear, often relegate him to the blurry background.

When I was a child, I was introduced to a god who was all seeing, all powerful, and all knowing. But to my child's mind, he looked distant, fearful, and untrustworthy. How can you feel close to a god who holds you in disdain for your many failures, a perfect god whom your flawed self is incapable of pleasing? Fortunately, that imbalanced and distorted vision of God eventually gave way to the understanding that God loved me like the most faithful of fathers—indeed, that he had given his Son to save me and take away my sins.

In the years that followed my conversion, I watched as the church jettisoned the hard god of my youth in favor of a much softer god—one who is always tender and tolerant and who does not demand too much of his people. In the Western church, notions of God’s holiness and awe have receded to the background or have disappeared altogether. But that soft god produces only soft followers, spiritually enfeebled and vulnerable to the shaping power of the surrounding culture and to the ever-changing circumstances that characterize human life.

What am I arguing for? A return to the hard god? By no means. Let’s not discard one distortion so we can embrace another. What we need is something only God can give—a true and deeper vision of who he is as the almighty, everlasting God, who is holy and yet merciful, jealous and yet loving, righteous and yet forgiving. This is the God of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and David and Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and all the faithful who have preceded us. They lived with a sense of God’s majesty, a life-shaping knowledge of his greatness and goodness. As A. W. Tozer has said, “The great Church has for centuries lived on the character of God. She’s preached God, she’s prayed to God, she’s declared God, she’s honored God, she’s elevated God, she’s witnessed to God.”³

Let us not settle, then, for a vision of God that is thin and anemic, one that will fall to pieces when life becomes more difficult than we can bear. Instead, let us pray that God will draw us out of our complacency so that we might hunger and thirst for more of him.

Studying God

One way to increase our yearning for God is to approach him both prayerfully and humbly through study. In Jewish tradition, study undertaken in this way is the highest form of worship.

But how can we possibly study a being who is vastly superior to anything or anyone we've ever encountered? Perhaps one way to begin is by resurrecting an old-fashioned word. The word is *attribute* (a-truh-byoot). God's attributes are facets of his character revealed in the Bible. Some might object that it is impossible for human beings to comprehend God—and they would be right. But God can enable us to experience him in deeper ways as we learn more about him. Why else would he reveal himself if he did not want to be known?

While studying his attributes, we must resurrect other old-fashioned words such as *holiness*, *omnipotence*, *omniscience*, *omnipresence*, *righteousness*, *sovereignty*, and *transcendence*. (Are you snoring yet?) But rather than boring us to death, these words, when excavated for their biblical meanings, may end up thrilling us and freeing us from the colossal mistake of concluding that God is too weak or too removed or too soft to enable us to live with joy and fearlessness regardless of the problems we face. Who knows—a thoroughgoing study of the attributes of God may even show us that God is far bigger and far better than we think. Like music heard clearly for the first time, our prayerful study of God may yield a depth of experience that amazes and delights us, putting God where he belongs—in the foreground—as our cares and concerns recede to the background.

Perhaps what we need most is not a crash course in music but a crash course in God. As we immerse ourselves in God's self-revelation, found within the pages of the Bible, we need to pray that his Spirit will show us who he really is. Studying the Bible without the guidance of the Holy Spirit will not yield the longed-for results.

One caveat: even with the best of intentions, it is easy to misunderstand the God we seek. Part of the problem is that sin clouds our vision, distorts our view. We want a god we can control, one we can manage and use. But God won't be reduced by

our selfish aspirations. Another hindrance is our own limited capacity. We are like children trying to scoop the ocean into a bucket—finite beings trying to comprehend the mind and heart of an infinite God.

At times we doubt God—perhaps not outwardly, but secretly. We judge his motives, particularly when things go wrong, suspecting him of being unkind, unfeeling, or even cruel. He doesn't act the way we think he should or according to our timelines. Or he fails to act at all. We pray and pray and hear no answer. Only silence.

Our judgments, based as they are on faulty and inadequate knowledge, can lead to feelings of disappointment, hurt, anger, and confusion. *How, we wonder, can a good God tolerate the cruelty and violence that often characterize our world?* Because we don't understand, we begin to question God's motives, his power, and his goodness. We wonder how an all-powerful God has not yet managed to clean up the universe. Though Christianity has had two thousand years to spread, and though it has made enormous contributions to the world, there is still so much darkness.

Catherine the Great was one of the world's most powerful rulers in the second half of the eighteenth century. Reigning from 1762 until her death in 1796, Catherine longed to bring Russian culture and government in line with the Enlightenment principles of Western Europe. But it was a daunting task. Here's how she replied to Diderot, a French philosopher who pressed her to transform Russia along more enlightened lines:

I have listened with the greatest pleasure to all the inspirations of your brilliant mind. But all your grand principles, which I understand very well, would do splendidly in books and very badly in practice. In your plans for reform, you are forgetting the difference

between our two positions: you work only on paper which accepts anything, is smooth and flexible and offers no obstacles either to your imagination or your pen, while I, poor empress, work on human skin, which is far more sensitive and touchy.⁴

Reading Catherine's response reminded me that God has deliberately chosen to work through a rather intransigent medium—the medium of human skin. As Catherine so archly observed, this is a medium that is “sensitive and touchy.” It does not quickly yield to abstract solutions, sound as they might be. Because God is working in and through broken people whose souls are neither smooth nor flexible, his activity may seem obscured and obstructed at times. He doesn't “live up to” our idealistic notions of how he should act or what he should do. As Paul says, we see, but through a glass darkly. Despite our confusion and obvious limitations, God has revealed himself in Scripture, and he has filled us with his Spirit so we can begin to understand more about who he is.

One thing to keep in mind when it comes to God is that an attribute is an artificial construct, a helpful way to learn about God. But God cannot be divided into his various attributes, nor will he act in ways that contradict himself. He is still just, for instance, even when he is expressing his mercy, and still loving when expressing his jealousy.

As A. W. Tozer points out, “God's attributes are not isolated traits of His character but facets of His unitary being. They are not things-in-themselves; they are, rather, thoughts by which we think of God, aspects of a perfect whole, names given to whatever we know to be true of the Godhead. To have a correct understanding of the attributes it is necessary that we see them all as one. We can think of them separately but they cannot be separated.”⁵

How to Use This Book

In the pages that follow, we will delve into the Bible in order to explore the attributes of God—aspects of his character that are clearly revealed. To help you reflect on one attribute each week, I have developed a devotional program intended to lead you to greater understanding and deeper prayer. Each week's readings contain five main elements: background information, Bible study, devotions, Bible promises, and prayer. Here's how a week unfolds:

Monday: A key Scripture passage that reveals a particular attribute of God, as well as background information and a brief Bible study to help you understand this attribute.

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday: Devotions to help you pray specific Scripture passages that relate to the attribute you are learning about. These are designed to provide a springboard for personal prayer and praise.

Friday: A reflection that helps you see how this attribute connects to God's promises in Scripture. It offers key Bible passages that can be read, reflected on, or even memorized. A section entitled "Continued Prayer and Praise" lists additional passages related to the attribute that can be prayed and studied over the weekend for those who desire to do so.

As you read through this book, I hope you will share my sense that learning more about God's attributes is like drawing water from a deep well—the kind that can refresh and invigorate your faith. In the days and weeks ahead, may God give you

the boldness to prayerfully insist that he nourish, sustain, and strengthen you with a clearer revelation of who he is.

The nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon once remarked, “No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. . . . But while the subject humbles the mind it also expands it.”⁶ May God reward your efforts with a deeper sense of how big he is so you may live your life wide open to all the opportunities that come to those who know how great God is.

1



GOD CARES
ABOUT YOU

LOVING

His Nature

From a natural standpoint, the most surprising thing about God is that he is love. It is not hard to conceive of a divine being who possesses immeasurable power or immortality or knowledge—other religions have such gods. For some of us, it is not that difficult to envision a god who expresses affection for us. But who could have dreamed up a being whose love is so extreme that he became incarnate to prove it? On the face of things, God would seem like a bad negotiator—trading power for weakness, riches for poverty, honor for humiliation. He even traded light for darkness, spending nine months in the womb so that he could convince us of his love and reconcile us to himself. God’s love is extreme and fierce. He is a suitor who won’t be put off, won’t be denied, won’t be spurned—unless, of course, we are obstinate and foolish enough to believe that he really doesn’t love us despite the obvious proofs of his love. For those who will receive him, his love is unfailing, steadfast, eternal, full of kindness, and far beyond anything we could ever ask or imagine.

Key Scripture

This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

JOHN 3:16-17

Monday

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

JOHN 3:16-17

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 8:31-39

Understanding His Love

The Bible uses two primary images to speak to us of God's love. In the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), his love is portrayed through the metaphor of marital love and commitment. He is a loving God who justly demands, though does not get, absolute fidelity from the people he loves. Even so, he continues to love them despite their unfaithfulness. The book of Hosea speaks of God binding himself to his people forever. The New Testament extends this metaphor by identifying Jesus as the Bridegroom and the church as his bride.

Scripture also uses the metaphor of parental love. Throughout the Old Testament, God is described as a loving Father to his people, Israel. Jesus develops this imagery in a way that shocks his contemporaries—addressing God as his Father and inviting his followers to do the same.

The Hebrew word *'ahab* can be translated “love, lovers, friends, allies.” It refers to the love between husband and wife, as well as to the love that exists between parents and children. It can also refer to the intimate bond of friendship. Used thirty-two times throughout Scripture in connection with God, it speaks of his faithful love for Israel and his love for justice and righteousness.

Deuteronomy 6:5 commands God's people to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” This Scripture has become part of a larger prayer called the *Shema*, the first words of which are drawn from this passage: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NIV). Observant Jews recite this prayer morning and evening, and often on their deathbeds, expressing their heartfelt response to God's faithful love.

Biblical love is not merely a matter of affectionate feelings or passion but is expressed through loving actions. Just as God

shows his faithful love by acting redemptively in the lives of his people, we are called to show our love for God through obeying him, loving his Word, and living in faithfulness.

The other Old Testament word for love is *hesed*, which can be translated “mercy, loving-kindness, covenant faithfulness.” It speaks richly of the undeserved love given by someone who is in a position of power, thereby capturing the generosity of God’s love.

In the New Testament, the verb *agapaō* and the noun *agapē* are used to describe human love as well as the love God has for people. This love is completely undeserved, stemming from God’s character rather than from anything in us that would attract his love. The New Testament also uses the Greek verb *phileō* to speak both of human and divine love and often to describe the love between friends.

If we have any doubts about the fierce nature of God’s love, we have only to remember the words of John 3:16: “This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Such sacrificial love demands a response. Like Jesus did, we are called to love our enemies. This doesn’t mean we have to feel affection for them, but it does mean we must act in love toward them. Galatians 5:22 describes love as a fruit of the Spirit. Only God’s Spirit alive within us can enable us to receive God’s love and express it to others.

When we love God, we cannot help but love our neighbors.

Lord, no one has loved me the way you have. Even when I was far from you, you called me and fought for me and stretched out your arm to save me. Thank you for blessing me every day—for speaking to me, sustaining me, forgiving me, refusing to give up on me. Thank you for protecting my soul. I love you, Lord.

Studying His Love

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word *love*? How does your experience of love compare with the biblical ideal?
2. What in your life makes you doubt God's love?
3. What do you think it means to love God with "all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength"? Be specific.
4. How have you been able to express the love of God to others?
5. How would your life be different if you could affirm Paul's words from Romans 8:31-32 in every situation, saying, "If God is for me, who can ever be against me? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for me, won't he also give me everything else?"
6. Take a moment to pray, asking God to deepen your knowledge of his unfailing love so you can reflect his kindness to others.

Tuesday

PRAYING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE

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

JOHN 3:16

Reflect On: John 3:16

Praise God: For Jesus, the irrefutable proof of God's love

Offer Thanks: Because God will never stop loving you

Confess: Any tendency to doubt God's love

Ask God: To help you perceive the depth of his love for you and for others



Not long ago I was swimming laps in a pool near my home. Normally my goggles help me to see the line down the center of the lane so I don't incur brain damage by swimming straight into the side of the pool. That day my progress was particularly slow because the goggles kept filling with water. About halfway through, after stopping every half lap to adjust them, I identified the problem. It seems I had put the goggles on upside down. No wonder they were taking on water.

Afterward, it occurred to me that upside-down goggles could be a useful metaphor for describing an affliction many of us share. When it comes to understanding God's love, some of us have things upside down. Though we've heard that God is love, and though we can believe he loves others, we can't quite believe he loves us. So we try hard to be good, and we wallow in guilt whenever we fail to measure up. We try to exercise faith

but find it difficult because we lack the energy that comes from knowing we are loved.

Part of the problem is that we live in a fallen world. Many of us have never experienced unconditional love. Always there have been strings attached.

A second problem is that there is demonic interference. Like static on a radio, this interference takes the form of doubts and lies that the devil tries to implant so that it will become impossible for us to perceive how much God cares about us. If he can damage our confidence in God's character, he can impede or even destroy our Christian witness.

Suffering can also sharpen our doubts. *How, we wonder, could a powerful, all-loving God allow evil into our lives? If he is a loving Father, why doesn't he do a better job of protecting us?*

The answer to such questions is not simple. It comes in part from knowing God more deeply so we can understand the interplay between love and freedom. It also comes from comprehending that real love is multifaceted and stronger than mere affection.

As we learn more about God's attributes, we may find that we are able to turn our spiritual goggles right side up so we can perceive his love more clearly, interpreting life's events not in terms of our circumstances but in light of the truth we know: "This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Wednesday

PRAYING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

ROMANS 5:6-8

“Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”

Jesus replied, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

MATTHEW 22:36-40

Reflect On: Romans 5:6-8; Matthew 22:36-40

Praise God: For being love

Offer Thanks: Because God first loved you

Confess: Any tendency to think you have to earn
God's love

Ask God: To let his love overflow in you



I have a friend whose teenage son has difficulty showing any kind of affection. The other day his younger sister asked whether he loved her. Chase just shrugged as if to say, *Maybe I do, maybe I don't, probably not, but who cares?* But his little sister wouldn't

give up. She proceeded to ask a long line of questions: “Who do you love? How about your favorite teacher at school? What about the dog?” Chase couldn’t work up much enthusiasm for anyone except the dog.

Then came the question my friend couldn’t help but overhear: “Chase, do you love Mom and Dad?”

“Kind of,” Chase replied, his voice flat.

Though it wasn’t what my friend wanted to hear, she wasn’t surprised. While many teenagers fail the “love test,” her son had never been good at it. She knew that her autistic son had difficulty expressing love for anyone. I wondered about the impact this must have had on their relationship. We parents can put up with a lot because we know that deep down our children love us. But what would it be like to care for a child who seems incapable of reciprocating, when love only moves in one direction?

When we think about love, we often think about people who are attractive to us. We love them because they’re beautiful, kind, affectionate, caring, courageous, smart, funny, or good. Something about them stirs our affection. But God is different. His love isn’t fixed on us because we’re good looking or great or perfect. The impetus for his love lies entirely within himself. The Bible says that God loved us when we were still wretched, still off track, still living in a way that deeply offended him. No law of mutual attraction was at work. God loved us simply because at his core *he is love*. That’s why Jesus could say to his followers that if someone slapped them on the cheek, they should turn the other cheek for another slap. He was talking about loving unlovely people with divine love, not human love.

Many of us are still applying a human model to our relationship with God. Perhaps that’s why we find it so difficult to believe God loves us. We think we’re the ones who need to

become lovable. Certain that we don't deserve God's love, we perpetually doubt him.

Isn't it time to stop making that mistake—to turn to God once and for all, surrendering our sin and brokenness in exchange for his life-altering love? Why don't we ask him to help us find a way to receive his love today?

Thursday

PRAYING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. . . .

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-7, 13

Reflect On: 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, 13

Praise God: For showing us what love is

Offer Thanks: That the greatest of all virtues is love

Confess: Any hostility that keeps you from proclaiming the gospel with love

Ask God: To increase your love for those who disagree with you



My aunt and uncle had a cabin in northern Michigan. It was a great place to visit, especially in warm weather when we could swim or fish in the river. One summer, when I was fourteen, my

uncle purchased an old wreck to drive around in the woods. I was surprised when he handed me the keys, assuring me that I—who had never been behind the wheel of a car—couldn't possibly damage it. Treating it more like a tank than a car, I gladly took the wheel. Sadly, my excursion ended when the car refused to budge after running over a large stump. I'm not much of a mechanic, but I think it may have been the universal joint.

As you may know, a U-joint is a joint with hinges that enables the wheels to move. I think God's love is like that—it's what drives the Christian life. Without it, faith devolves into dead religion with no power to change anyone, except perhaps for the worse.

Writing in the *New York Times* about the decline of evangelicalism in the United States, John S. Dickerson says, "Some evangelical leaders are embarrassed by our movement's present paralysis. I am not. Weakness is a potent purifier. As Paul wrote, 'I am content with weaknesses . . . for the sake of Christ' (2 Corinthians 12:10). For me, the deterioration and disarray of the movement is a source of hope: hope that churches will stop angling for human power and start proclaiming the power of Christ." He notes that Christians "cannot change ancient doctrines to adapt to the currents of the day. But," he says, "we can, and must, adapt the way we hold our beliefs—with grace and humility instead of superior hostility. The core evangelical belief is that love and forgiveness are freely available to all who trust in Jesus Christ. This is the 'good news' from which the evangelical name originates ('euangelion' is a Greek word meaning 'glad tidings' or 'good news'). Instead of offering hope, many evangelicals have claimed the role of moral gatekeeper, judge and jury. If we continue in that posture, we will continue to invite opposition and obscure the 'good news' we are called to proclaim."¹

Dickerson's analysis applies to Christians from every branch

of the church. Without love, the Good News doesn't sound very good. Only God's love can effectively transmit the gospel to others. It's what enables people to experience his transforming grace.

Friday

PROMISES ASSOCIATED WITH GOD'S LOVE

I was standing in the aisle after boarding the airplane, wondering why the line had stopped snaking forward. Looking toward the middle of the plane, I spotted the problem. A middle-aged man was doing his best to stuff an oversize bag into the bin above his seat. He kept pushing, shoving, pressing, squashing, and punching the bag as though sheer determination would make it smaller than it was. Those of us waiting in line behind him were getting restless. It was hard to believe he couldn't admit the obvious: there was no way that particular bag would ever fit into that particular space. Finally, an airline attendant took pity on everyone by simply checking the bag.

That experience made me think of how foolish it is to keep trying failed strategies despite evidence that they never work. Take the strategy of trying to make yourself acceptable to God—of trying to clean yourself up or behave your way into his good graces. No matter how hard or how long you try, you will never succeed. God's love isn't a prize to be earned but a gift to be received. You have to admit that you don't deserve to be loved but that you need to be loved. Getting to that place requires honesty and humility.

Putting God off until you "get your act together" is like telling the doctor you will make an appointment as soon as you are well. You will never get well without God's help.

C. S. Lewis says that the Christian "does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us."² Let's ask God today for the grace to receive everything he wants to give, believing that his love will make us who we want to be.

Promises in Scripture

*Some wandered in the wilderness,
lost and homeless.*

*Hungry and thirsty,
they nearly died.*

*“LORD, help!” they cried in their trouble,
and he rescued them from their distress.*

*He led them straight to safety,
to a city where they could live.*

*Let them praise the Lord for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done
for them.*

*For he satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things.*

*Some sat in darkness and deepest gloom,
imprisoned in iron chains of misery.*

*They rebelled against the words of God,
scorning the counsel of the Most High.*

*That is why he broke them with hard labor;
they fell, and no one was there to help them.*

*“LORD, help!” they cried in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.*

*He led them from the darkness and deepest gloom;
he snapped their chains.*

*Let them praise the Lord for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done
for them.*

*For he broke down their prison gates of bronze;
he cut apart their bars of iron.*

*Some were fools; they rebelled
and suffered for their sins.*

They couldn't stand the thought of food,

*and they were knocking on death's door.
"LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He sent out his word and healed them,
snatching them from the door of death.
Let them praise the Lord for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done
for them.*

PSALM 107:4-21

*The LORD your God is living among you.
He is a mighty savior.
He will take delight in you with gladness.
With his love, he will calm all your fears.
He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.*

ZEPHANIAH 3:17

This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

1 JOHN 4:10

Continued Prayer and Praise

Deuteronomy 6:4-6

Deuteronomy 7:6-11

Proverbs 3:12

Jeremiah 31:3

Hosea 11

Matthew 5:44-48

Matthew 22:36-40

Luke 7:44-48

John 16:27

John 17:22-26

Galatians 5:22

PRAYING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

1 Timothy 6:10

1 John 2:15-17