

LOVE
THE
ONLY
WAY

HOW GOD'S PERFECT LOVE

FILLS OUR DEEPEST LONGING

JARED C. WILSON

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OUR DEEPEST LONGING

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Introduction

“What is love? Baby, don’t hurt me.”

Okay, these aren’t the most profound lyrics in the history of music, to be sure, but if you can get past the mind-numbing beat and, for a certain generation, the mental image of *Saturday Night Live*’s Roxbury guys bobbing inanely to it, even this vacuous song manages (inadvertently?) to tap into something extremely profound.

Love is the most lauded subject in all of music, all of poetry, all of literature. All of life! It is the thing—if you can call it a thing—we all dream of and live to pursue and, once captured, still wonder at its mercurial feeling. Why doesn’t it seem to last once found? Why doesn’t romantic love, for instance, continually surge upward into ever-increasing realms of bliss? Why does love so often . . . hurt?

Here’s another golden nugget from a hip-hop classic: “Now that we’ve found love, what are we going to do with it?”

Want more of it, of course. And when what passes for love fails to satisfy the way we expect love should, we assume

we're out of love, perhaps were never truly in it. Maybe it's not just ordinary love we need but *true* love. Whatever that is.

“What is love? Baby, don't hurt me” doesn't seem to mean much of anything in the context of Haddaway's dance hit. But it does encapsulate the ancient conundrum of what we imagine love to be. Love is that thing where we never get hurt. Right?

You'd think we'd have figured this out by now, after centuries of enjoying and exploring love. But the songs just keep coming. Because so do the hurts.

C. S. Lewis once said about myth that it was “gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility.”¹ I think love songs are like that. All of these odes to love—from the poetry of the ancients to the bubble-gum romance of 1950s doo-wop, from the moony dreaming of countless ballads to even the raunchy club bangers of today—are feeble grasps at something true, real, satisfying . . . that lies just out of reach. All love songs are gleams of heaven falling on a jungle of imbecility.

So many songs cheapen love. A great many others idolize it. Which is really the same thing. They give us glimpses of love; hazy angles on romance, our heart's desire, the fulfillment of longing, the arrival of a yearned-for peace and joy. But they're still just gleams, never the true light.

As the late, great Larry Norman once sang, “The Beatles said all you need is love, and then they broke up.”²

Maybe they'd lost that loving feeling.

Maybe you have too. We all lose it from time to time.

One reason we'll always have love songs with us is because we know deep down that love is the greatest thing to ever

exist. But did you know the other reason is because love songs are in our DNA?

We have to go all the way back to the first human beings and the first recorded words spoken.

First, there was the divine word of “It is good.”

God looked out over his creation, with man and woman as its crown, and saw that it was good “indeed” (Gen. 1:31).

But there was a point where it wasn’t quite good enough. Do you remember? It was the time between the creation of man and the creation of woman. God made man, saw that he was alone, and decided that wasn’t good (2:18).

And this is where that second word comes in. This is the oldest human utterance:

And the man said:

“This one, at last, is bone of my bone
and flesh of my flesh;
this one will be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken from man.” (v. 23)

You can likely see from the formatting in your Bible that this is Hebrew poetry. This means that the first recorded human words spoken were actually sung. The oldest human words in recorded history were *a love song*.

You can practically hear Etta James’s soulful voice sumptuously spilling over the text: “At laaaaaast . . .”

“Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh.”

God ordained marriage then as the only human relationship that can be rightly described as “one flesh.” Which is why, forever after, every marriage has been perfectly fulfilling.

Okay, sorry, I know I lost you there. Baby, don’t hurt me.

We lost ourselves somewhere, way back there, shortly after this first love song, after this first union and before *reunion* was ever a thing, way back in that garden when the first Jerry Maguire declared to the first Dorothy Boyd in that first living room, “You complete me.”

Our hearts rose. Our eyes misted. Why? Because we all know the power of “You complete me.” We suspect we’re worth it. We hear it echoing in the dim memories of the garden we all carry around in our souls. But in the bones and flesh of our reality in exile, after the profession changed, we know that, after all, *it’s just a movie*.

These love songs. They’re *just songs*.

But what if they aren’t?

What if every romantic movie, every romantic song, every insipid Hallmark Christmas show and every flimsy Hallmark Valentine’s card, every stupid TV commercial that leverages romance and human fulfillment to sell makeup and blue jeans and bubble gum—even every lustful glance or scroll or click—is not because love isn’t out there but rather because somewhere it *is*? As Lewis also said, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”³

And what if, despite our failings and flaws, despite nearly everything we see with our longing eyes and know with our tired minds or even feel with our aching bodies, that other world was actually *here* in some real way?

Would that make your day? At last?

I don’t know what has brought you to holding this book in your hands. I don’t know if you feel loved right now or if you’ve ever felt loved, but I’m willing to bet you have at some moment felt unloved. At some point, maybe right now,

you've had the nagging thought that love is a myth, a rumor, a haunting.

Maybe love songs make you cry, or make you angry, or make you sick. Maybe love songs feel painful; every time you hear one, it adds insult to your emotional injury.

Have you had love but lost it? Or do you have it, but it's not quite scratching the existential itch you thought it would?

Maybe you've wondered, like I once did, if you could ever be loved. Or if you could ever love in return.

Well, you can. Come walk beside me for a while.



1

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but
the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

There is no escape from the conclusion that ultimately,
love is the only real power.

Peter Kreeft¹



I fondly remember my first marriage. I remember my feet shuffling nervously on the plywood floor during the wedding ceremony. I wasn't sure if I really wanted to go through with it. The bride seemed equally nervous.

Her name was Elizabeth. She was a pretty girl. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Her father was a dentist, if I recall correctly. So much of that time is hazy to my middle-aged mind today. But I remember the exhilarating flush of young love. The flutter of butterflies in the tummy and the wet spring air on the skin. The world seemed alive with possibilities, a grand stage upon which to carry out the thrills of a whirlwind romance like ours.

My friend Christopher officiated the ceremony. All of our friends had gathered to witness the solemnization of our sacred union in the giant wooden shoe on the playground of the First Baptist School in Brownsville, Texas. We only got thirty minutes for recess, so we had to make quick work of the thing. When it came time to seal the deal, being good Baptist children, we all knew that kissing wasn't appropriate, so I literally kissed a leaf, which Elizabeth then pressed against her cheek. I know, it sounds stupid. And it was. But I vividly recall a year earlier, in kindergarten, another child tattling on me to the teacher for saying the word *lipstick*. And I cried hot little kindergartener tears when I confessed that indeed I had said the word. We were too young to even

know real profanity. And here we were acting out one of the most profound human experiences, the event by which a man and woman are covenantally made one flesh. I have no idea whose idea the leaf-kiss thing was, but it seems downright metaphorical to me today. We were hiding our shame with leaves.

The relationship lasted only a few days, which amounts to eons in first-grader years. I don't exactly remember why we played "wedding" that day at recess, but I do remember liking Elizabeth, and I suppose at some point the liking had to be made *official*. In the humid shade of that big shoe, within the sacred trust of all the little rascals, Alfalfa and Darla had to make it real. It's what lovers do. And as silly as that little scene was, I see it now as a kind of epicenter of my lifelong endeavor in thinking about love all out of proportion.

It has taken a lot of years—and a lot of mistakes within those many years—to get closer to figuring out this love thing. I'm still not there, to be honest with you. But I'm about as close as I've ever been, and I hope you won't mind if I share some of that journey with you in this book.

When we're young, of course, we really have no idea what love is. We barely know when we're grown up. But when I was a boy, my innate longing for romance resulted in endless entertainment crushes. I was enamored with Catherine Bach's Daisy Duke and especially Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman. The preadolescent boy's attractions are about who looks pretty and fun.

But my taste in the opposite sex developed. While many boys my age were geeking out about Princess Leia or "Charlie's Angels," or about the Heathers, Thomas or Locklear,

I had more of an inclination toward the “girl next door” types—the Joanie Cunninghams and Mallory Keatons and Carol Seavers.

If you’re not getting any of these references, you were likely born before 1960 or after 1990. And if this is the case, you might have missed the greatest television sitcom for the celebration of the best adolescent crush ever: *The Wonder Years*.² I was thirteen years old when this show debuted in 1988, and while it technically takes place in the late 1960s, predicated on the adult Kevin Arnold’s recollections of his childhood, I felt *The Wonder Years* on a soul level. I still do, in fact.

Winnie Cooper (played by Danica McKellar) was the perfect apex and sum of the entire girl-next-door mythos. But I didn’t so much have a crush on Winnie Cooper as I had a crush on Kevin Arnold’s having a crush on Winnie Cooper. What I mean is, this show was magically able to tap into the angst and awe of childhood in a note-perfect way and one that reflected my inner life more than anything I’d ever seen. Kevin Arnold was me. No, I didn’t have an older brother and sister as he did, and I didn’t grow up in the cultural turmoil of the late 1960s and watch neighborhood teenagers graduate into the military draft like he did, and so on, but this temporal context was all beside the point. I felt Kevin’s frustrations, knew his social awkwardness, identified with his perennial search for love.

If you followed the show, you know Kevin romanced a few different girls—the bossy Becky (played by McKellar’s younger sister, interestingly enough), the exotic Madeline—but beneath and through it all, his heart always beat for Winnie. *The Wonder Years* was about a lot of things, but that’s

fundamentally what it was really about—an everyboy's love for the girl next door. It was a very specific show about a very universal experience. The show reflected but also transcended its culture in making that romance, with all its pains and all its joys, the constant through line.

So I was gutted, of course, when five years later, after having basically grown up with Kevin, the finale reveals that Kevin doesn't in fact end up with Winnie. Yes, we also learned his father died of a heart attack, and that was sad. But Kevin didn't end up with Winnie! Are you kidding me?

I would reexperience this trauma later with the lesser art of *Dawson's Creek* when, in the series finale, we see that stupid Joey chose stupid Pacey and not her real true love, Dawson. Of course, I was one of only about eight people angry about this outcome, I think. They tried to mitigate the pain of this plot twist by sending Dawson out to Hollywood to become the film director he always dreamed of being, but people with beating hearts like mine know that the whole point in those early *Creek* episodes of the boy watching the entire Spielberg oeuvre in his childhood bedroom wasn't really about watching movies but about the neighbor girl rowing across the creek to climb up the ladder and through his window to watch the movies with him. I mean, she *literally* lived next door.

Get everything material you ever wanted. Accomplish every goal you set. Go every place you ever imagined. In the moments of stillness, when you face yourself, you'll realize that without true love it's all a waste.

What's this all about? I'd be arrogant to think that after thousands of years of human reflection on the mystical gravity of love, I'd be the one to entirely crack the code, but I

think that somehow this “crush on the girl next door” stuff has to come from that precious prelapsarian moment when that first man saw that first woman for the first time and couldn’t help but sing, “At last!” Romance—and all other longings for relationship, I think—can be traced right back to that garden scene.

But that dreamy moment out of time seemed about as short-lived as first grade recess.

The adolescent boy’s attractions begin to churn with lustful undercurrents. That sin has been crouching just outside the door of puberty, waiting to devour him. Everything gets all mixed up. And not just for boys of a certain age but for everyone. We mistake being in lust for being in love. We mistake infatuation for romance. We are messes, so we make everything messy. But deep down, our root desire is really about longing for the experience of real love, that somebody would know us totally and *at the same time* love us completely.

That has to come from somewhere. Sin is disobedience against a holy God, but it is also misdirected attempts at getting from someplace else in some other way what God himself gives and in his very self actually is. As Bruce Marshall once wrote, “The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.”³

The Book of Love

The doo-wop group The Monotones was the first to wonder, wonder, who, bad-doo-oo-hoo, who wrote the book of love. For their part, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers wondered why fools fall in love. Songs like these speak to

the seemingly uncrackable cipher of love. No animal instinct can explain it. No pragmatism can solve it. It's the stuff of potions and angels and Mr. Sandman. The most popular songs of the 1950s were much, much simpler than the pop songs of the late 2000s, but they also wrestled with love in a way these later songs rarely do. Pop music, like a boy, grows up, and lust ends up poisoning the whole enterprise.

On the way to the coffee shop to write this chapter, I was listening to some old love songs on the radio and realized most of them wouldn't rate today, and not just because the music style is out of fashion. When our forebears sang about love, they stood in awe—both of the objects of their desire and of love itself. Sure, they're praising external appearances a lot of the time, but like the ancient poets, they're comparing eyes, hair, and smiles to heavenly beings, ethereal feelings, and the like. They are reveling in beauty and, as it always does, true beauty transports them, connects them to an ecstasy beyond what is merely seen. "Are the stars out tonight?" The singer can't tell, because his love has arrested his attention with her loveliness. He only has eyes for her.

Fast-forward to today's fixation on faceless bodies, the comparison of women's private parts to dump trucks and milkshakes. The poetry is gone. We've lost that lovin' feeling.

I know I sound like a grumpy old man right now. And it's not fair to compare the best examples of musical yesteryear with the worst examples of today. There are some good songwriters out there still wrestling with the mysteries of love and saying some profound things. But in terms of popular music, mainstream songs ostensibly about love have gotten

cruder, ruder, and, indeed, less poetic. Our culture does not speak of love in lovely ways.

It may surprise some to know, however, that this is not because as a people we are more sinful today than anybody else was in the past. We may have grown coarser, but it's only because we have gotten collectively tired of holding up the pretense that we are good people. There may yet be a revival of virtue and propriety—cultures do tend to swing like a pendulum from extreme to extreme—but we'll still be just as sinful even when we recover our shame.

This cycle has played out from the beginning of time. The broken love of Genesis 3 spills quickly into the first murder. The wickedness intensifies then, calcifying in the earliest culture. It's not long, historically speaking, before God pours out his wrath on everyone in the world, minus one family with which he means to reboot humanity. But even that reboot does not proceed sinlessly. Drunkenness, bloodthirsty violence, and sexual immorality reemerge into the world almost as soon as that family steps back onto dry land.

The question of where love comes from—Who wrote the book on it? Why do fools fall into it?—*is* this story. It's the same story of sinful, broken people navigating a sinful, broken world. The best love songs, then, even if written by godless heathens, still somehow manage to point to the peace and joy of unbrokenness, to the shalom of love fully known and realized. “I don't know if we're in a garden or on a crowded avenue,” sang The Flamingos, who only have eyes for you; and they have, perhaps unwittingly, managed to summarize the civilizational progression of love itself. For we began in a garden and now find ourselves exiled on the

avenue—crowded physically and mentally and emotionally—and still longing to return to that garden, where our eyes may be filled with the glory of love.

Every love song is a gleam of beauty falling on a jungle of imbecility. The gleams tell us there is a brighter light out there, a glory more glorious than even the glory of earthly loves. There is a story that makes sense of all the stories, even the terrible ones.

This story begins in the eternal mind of the Author. And it makes perfect sense that the greatest romance ever told would come from the God who is love in his very self. “God is love,” the apostle John tells us (1 John 4:8, 16). It’s not just that he’s loving, though he certainly is. And it’s not just that he *has* love, though he certainly does. No, John boldly asserts that God’s very self is the very thing all humankind has always been starving for and searching for. Your constant need for love is fundamentally a constant need for God.

Now, how is it that God can be love in his very self? Some dullards have said that God made humankind because he was lonely, because in effect he needed someone to love. However, this would make God not God at all but more of a glorified proto-man. It was Adam whose solitude was not good; it was Adam who was perfected by receiving one to love and to love him in return. God did not become love upon his creation of anyone or anything. He *is* love. Which means he’s always been love.

But if there was a time before anything else was, yet there’s never been a time when God was not, how can this be? Love needs an object, doesn’t it? You can’t love *nothing*.

Our knowledge of God helps us here. What do we know about the one true God? We know that he exists eternally

in three persons. There are not three gods; nor is there one god who sometimes manifests in one of three different personalities. Rather, God is a Trinity of equally and essentially divine persons. *This* is how God is love. He has always had love within himself, enjoying the relational love among the trinitarian fellowship. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. The Father loves the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father. The Son loves the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Son.

If we find love mysterious, is it any wonder? The very fountain of love, he who is love in his very self, is an eternal and inscrutable wonder. Have you figured out the math of how the Trinity “works”? Well, then, neither can you figure out the math of how love works.

The love of God is so intense, so perfect, and the glorious love each person of the Triune Godhead gives to the others becomes the basis for expansion of this love outside of the impassible reality of itself. God doesn’t need anyone else to love, and he certainly doesn’t need to receive love, but he sovereignly wills to make creatures in his own image, to know his love and to love him in return, to reflect his own glory in a special way.

So when that first naked guy stood there looking at that first naked gal, and they both lacked shame, and they both felt nothing but the ineffable quality of love—so ecstatic and glorifying that the only reasonable response was to sing—they were experiencing something of the intratrinitarian love of God.

It lasts for about a minute. Eventually that man and woman decide something else may satisfy. They don’t want to just know God but be in his place. The perfect experience

of love is shattered. And this is still at the beginning of the Book!

But the sordid history book about love-hungry sinners reaches its climax when the Word becomes flesh. Love puts skin on. He is the new Adam—sinless and able to give love perfectly. Jesus says a lot about love, but he mostly just *does it*. He loves anyone and everyone. The people you expect he should. And the people you suspect he wouldn't. Even some people you think he *shouldn't*. He appears to love willy-nilly. He's not asking anyone's permission. He just loves freely, widely, promiscuously.

Jesus loves all the wrong people. People who can offer him nothing. People who cannot love him the way he loves them. People who hate him. He doesn't seem hindered at all by their lovelessness or their unloveliness. He loves them so much, in fact, that he very often puts himself in their position, stooping to their level, touching their wounds, embracing their pain. He ends up loving so much that he takes their shame upon himself, even their sin and the condemnation it deserves. He loves all the way to the cross. And as the most popular Bible verse in the history of the world tells us, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

There is no greater love than this (15:13).

So now you know who wrote the book of love. The only one who could. God created this crazy little thing called love as a reflection of himself and of the story of the gospel—the good news of the radical love of God through Jesus Christ, whose sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection

save sinners who repent of their sin and trust in him. The gospel helps us crack the code.

And now you know why fools fall in love. Because even sinners who don't know God or want anything to do with his love have been made in God's image. The reflection of Love is in their bones. Love, though corrupted because of sin and distorted because of the fall, is in every person's DNA.

It's for this reason that so much of what we consider love becomes not-love so easily. Sin is why we don't always feel the love we want and more often don't give the love we should. But the Book tells us something vitally important about that mess too.

I Want to Know What Love Is

The Bible nowhere offers a direct definition of *love*. It often describes different kinds of love, but it never offers the kind of summation we find in a dictionary. So how do we know what we're even talking about when we talk about love? I think, based on everything the Bible does say about love, in all its shades and meanings, we might define love this way: *love is an orientation toward others for their glory and for their good*. This refers exclusively to interpersonal love, of course, not to lesser "loves" like your love of kittens, French fries, that song or that movie, or your favorite football team.

Let me unpack this definition a bit. Love can and often does come with certain feelings we call love. We might properly call these *affections*. You can have these in different capacities and intensities for a significant other or for your children or for your parents or for friends. I feel and exhibit

loving affections for all kinds of people. But what I feel for my wife is different, of course, than what I feel for my best male friends.

We feel certain things about those with whom we're close or to whom we're otherwise connected. But we also feel certain things about inanimate objects or even persons we don't know. The feelings are not as strong, of course, or as enduring, but sometimes we do not have loving affections for our spouse either, or our friends. We can be angry with them. Or we may just be struggling at certain moments or in certain seasons to feel the way we used to feel or think we ought.

Does this mean, then, that we have stopped loving them? Or should stop loving them?

The world very often says yes. This is why fools who fall in love are said to have fallen *out*. When you're not in love anymore, it's time to find a new love.

Obviously, our definition of real love must transcend feelings. What remains when certain loving feelings are hard to come by? That's when real love kicks in. Because if love is going to be genuine, it must reflect our immovable God (who is neither moved nor changed by feelings) and the constant love he has within himself and for others. This means love must exist beyond how it makes us feel. The love the Trinity enjoys is the love of mutual glorification, a love that is simply because the Trinity *is*. In other words, the Father doesn't love the Son because of the Son's performance or the reciprocity of love. The Father loves the Son because he's the Son. He loves the Son as the Son is, because of who the Son is, because *he* is the Son.

Do you see the significance yet for the love you and I have for each other?

If I truly love you, it will not be because you perform a certain way for me—that you “do something for me,” in other words. That would not be love at all. If I truly love you, I will love you because you are you. That is real love of you rather than what you do or how you make me feel. And that’s how love is an orientation toward others for their glory. It aims to delight in the them-ness of persons. I affirm the image of God in you by loving you simply for being you. Really, I’m affirming the glory of God to have made you and to be showing something of himself in and through you.

I can do this whether or not you even believe there is a God. Also, to be oriented toward you for your glory doesn’t mean I affirm everything you think, say, or do. It doesn’t mean I affirm your desires or appetites. If you are engaged in something that demeans or otherwise serves to obscure the image of God in which you are made, you are diminishing your own glory. It would be unloving, then, to agree with you about something with which God disagrees.

Love is not an all-approving grin. It seeks not the other person’s pleasure or agreement but the other person’s *glory*.

Similarly, love is an orientation toward others for their good. This means when I love you, I want what is truly best for you. The Bible is quite good at helping us understand how so many pleasures we pursue are violations of God’s holiness and therefore destructive to our very selves. We may not think so or, if we do, even care. But not everything we want to do, say, or think is good. Therefore, if I love you, I will only support or affirm what is genuinely for your good. This is why in Romans 12:9, the apostle Paul connects genuine love to detesting evil and clinging to what is good. Love

is an orientation toward others for their glory and for their good.

Okay, so how do we do this? What does real love look like?

Paul gives us a stunning picture in perhaps the second most famous Scripture passage in the history of the world.

Higher Love

We've all heard 1 Corinthians 13 recited at wedding after wedding. This biblical chapter on love is to weddings what "Amazing Grace" is to funerals. Which is to say, even people who don't know God or profess faith in Jesus, when they want their wedding ceremonies to have a whiff of religion in them, go to 1 Corinthians 13.

You've no doubt heard the passage read at many weddings in front of couples who honestly have no idea what they're doing. The words feel gushy and mushy and light and fluffy, and they really have no clue what love is going to require of them. It sounds like uplifting religious poetry to their ears, when really it's a call to die.

I officiated a few weddings in my time as a pastor, and I think pastors at these shindigs should spend a considerable amount of time just asking, "Are you sure? But are you sure? Like, are you really *sure*?"

In his book *What Did You Expect?*—which is a great title for a marriage book, by the way—Paul Tripp writes:

I performed the marriage, so I got the call. It is almost always made by the wife, and she is calling because she has actually been forced to face what, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she knew to be true—she and her husband are

sinner. The call is usually made a few days or weeks after the honeymoon. On the honeymoon the self-orientation of sin is overshadowed by exotic cuisine and gorgeous sites, but when the couple returns to real, everyday life, minus these distractions, they are forced to face who they really are and what their marriage is actually about. . . .

Sara called me at 6:30 AM the day after the ceremony. I picked up the phone to these two words: “It’s over!” I knew it wasn’t over. In fact, I was happy that she was making the call so soon. I thought Sara and Ben were the smart kids in the class. They had gotten to the end of themselves quickly.⁴

The invitation to love is an invitation to die to yourself and live for the good of others.

And this kind of love has to do with so much more than marriage. The gospel of Jesus Christ’s love affects all of our relationships—or it *ought* to. And when you do relationships with anyone for any length of time, you see that you can’t *not* be in a relationship with a sinner. Of course, neither can they.

So the invitation to love is also an invitation to subdue our baser instincts and embody the love from on high, the love that came down to us, for us. Real love is love that resembles Jesus.

When the grace of God changes a sinner, it can’t help but overflow out of that person and extend to others. And redeemed sinners find more and more that they can conduct themselves in all of their relationships through the powerful love of God. And when you do relationships through the love of God, you learn over and over again that love has a lot less to do with feelings and a lot more to do with forgiveness.

Real love, as God intends it, is meant both as a gift to be enjoyed and as a glory to be reflected on his Son.

Let's refamiliarize ourselves with the passage, how about?

If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13)

Paul is writing these beautiful things to a very ugly church. The Corinthians are fractured by division and fraught with immorality. They are spiritually weak and very, very imma-

ture. So in the first twelve chapters of 1 Corinthians, he's reminding them of the gospel and then working through various theological and practical issues. He addresses their division, he teaches them about wisdom, he rebukes their immorality, he instructs them on church discipline, and he talks about lawsuits and marriage and divorce and Christian liberty and spiritual gifts. And then at the end of chapter 12 he talks about the unique nature of the church body, which then gives way to this beautiful passage on love.

All the stuff that came before, he's saying, must culminate in love.

The form of 1 Corinthians 13 is really interesting too. Paul places his description of love (found in vv. 4–6) between two interesting theological bookends. Each bookend clarifies the *why* of love and really the *what* of love. The first bookend (vv. 1–3) is Paul's way of culminating everything he's said to the Corinthian church thus far (chapters 1–12) with what matters most. He's saying that even if you get chapters 1–12 right—your behavior is well-managed, your worship is orderly, and the like—if your heart isn't tuned to the music of the gospel, it will all be wasted. We know who real Christians are, Jesus says in John 13:35, because of what? Their love.

Love is, in fact, the highest good.

This is what Paul is getting at in that first theological bookend. The person who possesses a supernatural ability to speak in tongues, an exhaustive knowledge of the Scriptures, or any other miraculous religious power who doesn't also possess love effectively has nothing.

This is what Paul is getting at in that second theological bookend too. In verse 13, he writes, “Now these three remain:

faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love.” As it pertains to virtues, love is the end-all, be-all.

Why?

Perhaps because it emanates from God himself, the One who is love. Perhaps because God has no faith or hope. He is the proper object of those two virtues but has no need to exhibit them himself. But love? He certainly has love within himself.

There are other reasons why love is “the greatest,” and I’ll explore a few of them later, but here we see how the two theological bookends of 1 Corinthians 13 establish love as the highest and greatest virtue.

Only true love can get us through those “day after the ceremony” moments. Only true love can get us through any moment when we feel as though most certainly “it’s over.”

Loving feelings can get you through a wedding ceremony and a few days, weeks, maybe even a few years. But only the highest love can get you through the lowest moments. The absence of the highest love makes the richest person the poorest, while the presence of it makes the poorest the richest.

The Glory of Love

Love is the highest good. And by “good,” I mean both virtue and possession. Love is the highest virtue, adorning and grounding every other virtue—peace, contentment, joy, even moral purity—in the essence of God’s character. And love is the greatest possession. You know this. You feel this. It’s why you can achieve and accumulate—you can get pleasure and money and stuff—but it all feels empty when you don’t feel loved or have someone to love.

We feel empty when we don't feel loved by our parents or by our siblings or by anybody else. Our friends. Even our church. But it's not just our feelings that are hindered by lovelessness. Our very survival may be threatened. For example, multiple studies have shown the physiological impact on infants in orphanages whose basic needs for nutrition and hygiene are provided for but who otherwise are not touched, held, or spoken to.

For instance, in Romania in the 1980s, by ages six to 12, levels of the stress hormone cortisol were still much higher in children who had lived in orphanages for more than eight months than in those who were adopted at or before the age of four months, according to a study from *Development and Psychopathology*. Other work has shown that children who experienced early deprivation also had different levels of oxytocin and vasopressin (hormones that have been linked to emotion and social bonding), despite having had an average of three years in a family home.⁵

In the end, you can certainly live without love, but without love, you may not want to. The impact of lovelessness is huge, almost incalculable.

Why?

Because real love is, in part, an implicit affirmation of the glory of the *imago Dei*—the image of God—in us.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,” Paul writes, “and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). It doesn't matter if you're the smartest person in the room. If you know the most Bible verses.

If you've served in church the longest. If you give the most money. If you read the most books. If you behave the most morally. These are all lesser glories. They do not reflect the glory of the image of God like love does.

Love is the most glorious glory. This is because, when given to others, love gives people a glimpse of God's love for them. Love for others becomes a living apologetic for the existence of the God who is love. And love is the most glorious glory because, when given to God, love gives him his due, agreeing with him about his own worthiness and preciousness.

You may wonder at this point how my definition of love fits with our consideration of love for God. What does love seeking the glory and the good of others have to do with God? The glory part we get. Loving God glorifies him, gives him through our worship the praise and honor he deserves. But what about his good? Can we "do good" to God?

God, of course, lacks for nothing. He does not need anything from us, as if he is somehow deficient without our contribution, whether a good work or a good word. We certainly cannot do the opposite of good to God in the sense that we cannot harm him or diminish him in any way. He is God.

But we can harm his reputation. We can diminish others' sense of his worthiness with our lovelessness. When we love God, we do good to him by magnifying him and commending him to our neighbors.

And there is still another way we, in effect, "do good to God" by our love. See, the Son of God so identifies with the poor, the persecuted, and the sick that when we care for them, he receives it not simply as a love to them but a love to himself (Matt. 25:40). When we don't forgive others,

God takes it personally (6:15). John connects love for God's children with love for God as well (1 John 5:2).

One may argue these Scriptures refer only to our love for Christian brothers and sisters, but the author of Hebrews connects care for the stranger with caring for the Lord's servants too (13:2). And in any event, Jesus makes it clear both that everyone is our neighbor and that love for neighbor is inextricable from love for God. Thus, when we do good to others, including those who don't like or who aren't like us, we are doing good to him by magnifying his love, which is glorious and gracious.

I have a friend named Mez who grew up in a painful world as an unbeliever, as one who in fact hated both God and people who claimed to speak for God.

Mez's grandmother was a prostitute. His grandfather committed suicide. His mother ran away with the best man at her wedding. And his father was an alcoholic and a gambling addict. At two years old, Mez was abandoned on the street. Between ages two and fourteen, he was shuffled around between thirty and forty institutions, orphanages, and foster homes. By age twelve, Mez was doing drugs. By age sixteen, he was homeless.

When Mez was homeless and dealing drugs, he encountered a group of young men at a community center who had come there to play soccer and to share the good news about Jesus. He utterly despised them and their message, rejecting the ideas of God's wrath for his sin and God's love for his salvation with equal disgust for each. He constantly insulted the young men and threatened them.

By age twenty-one, Mez was incarcerated in a maximum security prison. Those Christians he'd spent so much time

hating came to visit him. They persisted in love even while he persisted in hate.

Mez said, “Upon my release on parole, one of the Christian men whose face I used to spit in gave me a place to live. He gave me a home that I could call my own.”⁶ Eventually, the love he was shown, even in the face of his hateful rejection, began to open his heart to hear the gospel, and Mez was converted. Today, Mez is a missionary and pastor, a church planter in his native Scotland, where he also runs an organization dedicated to planting gospel-centered churches in the poorest neighborhoods. He is where he is today certainly because of God, and because God saw fit to use Christians who never stopped loving even when they were hated.

That Mez is a lover of God today is itself an incredible story of astounding grace. And it’s a testimony to the glory of love.

This is what Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 13 between those two bookends. For love to be glorious, it must be a radical reorientation of our selves for the glory and good of others. Those evangelists endured Mez’s abuse in order to be *for* Mez’s glory and good. If we want to know love for ourselves, it begins with this emptying of self and choosing of the other. This is the way of transformation. This is the way to glory.

Of course, I didn’t know any of this during my short-lived first marriage. Lasting all of thirty minutes and beginning in a big wooden shoe should’ve been just two indications that love was only being played with, *playacted*. And yet, it still took me a very long time, well into adulthood in fact, to learn how to stop playing with love, to stop acting. I wish I’d

outgrown the lesser glories that harmed others, myself, and my relationship with God much, much earlier. The people I've hurt certainly do too.

But the most remarkable thing I've learned in all my failures, in all my stupid spitting on love, my fist-shaking at love, is that real love never walked away. I came to my senses one night in the loneliness of our guest bedroom, feeling like death in the ruins I'd made of my life. I was a wretched tangle of sin and despair. But I discovered that night that, when I was at my worst, love never left. In fact, I've learned that love was made just for such needy moments.