

EXPERIENCING GOD

How to Live the
Full Adventure of
Knowing and Doing
the Will of God

Henry T. Blackaby
& Claude V. King



Nashville, Tennessee

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Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment."

MATTHEW 22:37-38

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GOD PURSUES A LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU

God Himself pursues a love relationship with you. He is the One who takes the initiative to bring you into this kind of relationship. He created you for a love relationship with Himself. That is the very purpose of your life. This love relationship can and should be real and personal to you.

This love relationship, however, is not a one-sided affair. He wants you to know Him

and worship Him. Most of all, He wants you to love Him. Jesus said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him" (John 14:21). If you want God to reveal Himself to you, you must love Him and obey Him.

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MY LIFE

God's purpose for me is a . . .

What two characteristics should this relationship have to me?

What three ways do I respond in this relationship? If I want God to reveal Himself to me, what must I do?

OBEDIENCE AND LOVE

Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). When you obey Jesus, you show that you love and trust Him. The Father loves those who love His Son. For those who love Him, Jesus said He would love them and show Himself to them. Obedience is the outward expression of your love of God.

The reward for obedience and love is that He will show Himself to you. Jesus set an example for you in His life. He said, "But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do" (John 14:31). Jesus was obedient to every command of the Father. He demonstrated His love for the Father by obedience.

A love relationship with God requires that you demonstrate your love by obedience. This is not just a following of the "letter" of the law, but it is a following of the "spirit" of the command as well. If you have an obedience problem, you have a love problem. Focus your attention on God's love. If you were standing before God,

could you describe your relationship to Him by saying, "I love You with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind and all my strength"?

DIFFICULTY WITH THE RELATIONSHIP

One of our church members always was having difficulty in his personal life, in his family, at work, and in the church. One day I went to him and asked, "Can you describe your relationship with God by sincerely saying, 'I love You with all of my heart'?"

The strangest look came over his face. He said, "Nobody has ever asked me that. No, I could not describe my relationship with God that way. I could say I obey Him, I serve Him, I worship Him, and I fear Him. But I cannot say that I love Him."

I realized that everything in his life was out of order because God's basic purpose for his life was out of order. God created us for a love relationship with Him. If you cannot describe your relationship with God by saying that you love Him with all your being, then you need to ask the Holy Spirit to bring you into that kind of a relationship.

If I were to try to summarize the entire Old Testament, it would be expressed in this verse: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5).

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

This heart-cry of God is expressed throughout the Old Testament. The essence of the New Testament is the same. Quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus said the greatest commandment in the law is: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Everything depends on this! Everything in your Christian life, everything about knowing Him and experiencing Him, every-

thing about knowing His will depends on the quality of your love relationship to God. If that is not right, nothing in your life will be right. Notice what God has to say about a love relationship:

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life. (Deut. 30:19-20)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. (John 14:21)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. . . . [Nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35, 37, 39)

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:16)

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . . We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:9-10, 19)

YOUR FIRST LOVE

Do you realize that the Lord does not just give you life—He *is* your life? He has drawn you to Himself. He sent His only Son to provide eternal life for you. Jesus laid down His life for you. You did not initiate a love relationship with God. He initiated a love relationship with you. In fact, God loved you before you came into the world. He began to demonstrate His love for you on the cross of Jesus.

Because God has loved you, He wants you to love Him as well. The Scriptures above indicate some of the ways you can express your love for Him. You can choose life, listen to His voice, hold fast to Him, believe in His only Son, obey His commands and teachings, and be willing to lay down your life for your Christian brothers and sisters.

When you do love God, He promises to respond with His blessings. You and your children will live under His blessings. By trusting in Jesus, you have eternal life. The Father will love you. God will come to make His home with you. He will make you more than a conqueror over all difficulties. You never will be separated from His love.

What is the one thing God wants from you? He wants you to love Him with all your being. That is the greatest commandment. Your experiencing God depends on your having this relationship of love. A love relationship with God is more important than any other single factor in your life.

WHAT EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON

Everything in my experience with God depends on the quality of my ...

If that is not right, what in my life will be right? Why does God want me to love Him?

Picture in your mind a tall ladder leaning against a wall. Now think about your life as a process of climbing that ladder. Wouldn't it be a tragedy to get to the top of the ladder and find you placed it against the wrong wall? One life to live and you missed it!

Your relationship to God (Father, Son, and Spirit) is the single most important aspect of your life. If it is not right, nothing else is important.

If you knew that all you had was a relationship with Him, would you be totally and completely satisfied? Many people would say, "Well, I would like to have that relationship, but I sure would like to do something" or "I sure would like for Him to give me a ministry or give me something to do."

We are a "doing" people. We feel worthless or useless if we are not busy doing something. The Scripture leads us to understand that God is saying, "I want you to love me above everything else. When you are in a relationship of love with Me, you have everything there is." To be loved by God is the highest relationship, the highest achievement, and the highest position in life.

That does not mean you will never do anything as an expression of your love for Him. God will call you to obey Him and do whatever He asks of you. However, you do not need to be doing something to feel fulfilled. You are fulfilled completely in a relationship with God. When you are filled with Him, what else do you need?

NO COMPETITORS

Do you really want to love the Lord your God with all of your heart? He will allow no competitors. He says:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one

and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matt. 6:24)

When you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget the LORD. . . . (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you). (Deut. 6:11, 12, 16)

So it shall be, when the LORD your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you). (Deut. 6:10-16)

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt. 6:31-33)

Out of His love for you, He will provide all else that you need—when you love Him and Him alone.

THE PURSUIT

God always takes the initiative in this love relationship. God must take the initiative and come to us if we are to experience Him. This is the witness of the entire Bible. He came to Adam and Eve in the

Garden of Eden. In love He fellowshiped with them, and they with Him. He came to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. God took the initiative for each person in the Old Testament to experience Him in a personal fellowship of love. This is true of the New Testament as well. Jesus came to the disciples and chose them to be with Him and experience His love. He came to Paul on the Damascus Road. In our natural human state, we do not seek God on our own initiative. "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

Sin has affected us so deeply that no one seeks after God on his own initiative. Therefore, if we are to have any relationship with Him or His Son, God will have to take the initiative. This is exactly what He does. God draws us to Himself. The Scriptures testify to the drawing activity of God:

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. . . . Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. . . . Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father. (John 6:44-45, 65)

The LORD has appeared to me of old saying: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you. (Jer. 31:3)

I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. (Hos. 11:4)

The love that God focuses on your life is an everlasting love. Because of that love, He has drawn you to Himself. He has drawn you with cords of love when you were not His friend, when you

were His enemy. He gave His own Son to die for you. To firmly anchor the experiencing of God and the knowing of His will, you must be absolutely convinced of God's love for you.

Paul. God came to Saul, known later as Paul (Acts 9:1-19). Saul was actually opposing God and His activities and fighting against God's Son Jesus. Jesus came to Paul and revealed the Father's purposes of love for him. This also is true in our lives. We do not choose Him. He chooses us, loves us, and reveals His eternal purposes for our lives.

The Disciples. Jesus said to those who were His disciples: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you. . . . You are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world" (John 15:16, 19). Didn't Peter choose to follow Jesus? No. Jesus chose Peter. Peter responded to the invitation of God. God took the initiative.

Jesus and Peter:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus answered and said unto him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."
(Matt. 16:13-17)

Jesus said that Peter was responding to God's initiative in his life. Jesus asked the disciples who men said He was. Then He asked them who they said He was. Peter answered correctly, "You

are the Christ." Then Jesus made a very significant statement to Peter, "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

In essence Jesus was saying, "Peter, you could never have known and confessed that I am the Christ unless My Father had been at work in you. He caused you to know who I am. You are responding to the Father's activity in your life. Good!"

Do you realize that God determined to love you? Apart from that, you never would have become a Christian. He had something in mind when He called you. He began to work in your life. You began to experience a love relationship with God where He took the initiative. He began to open your understanding. He drew you to Himself. What did you do?

When you responded to His invitation, He brought you into a love relationship with Himself. But you would never know that love, be in the presence of that love, or be aware of that love if God had not taken the initiative. The following Scriptures describe the initiatives God takes to have a love relationship with you.

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deut. 10:6)

All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. (Luke 10:22)

You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain. (John 15:16)

For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil. 2:13)

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. (1 John 3:16)

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Rev. 3:20)

God always takes the initiative to establish a love relationship with you.

SEEKING GOD

Why do I not seek after God on my own initiative? If I am to have a relationship with God, who must take the initiative? What is required for me to anchor firmly the experiencing of God and to know His will for certain?

CREATED NOT FOR TIME, BUT ETERNITY

God did not create you for time; He created you for eternity. Time (your lifetime on earth) provides the opportunity to get acquainted with Him. It is an opportunity for Him to develop your character in His likeness. Then eternity will have its fullest dimensions for you.

If you just live for time (the here and now), you will miss the ultimate purpose of creation. If you live for time, you will allow your past to mold and shape your life today. Your life as a child of God ought to be shaped by the future (what you will be one day). God uses your present time to mold and shape your future usefulness here on earth and in eternity.

You may have some things in your past that are having a strong limiting influence on your life today. These may include handicaps, a troubled family background, failures, shame over some personal or family "secret," or such things as pride, success,

fame, recognition, excessive wealth, and so forth. You may realize that you are primarily being shaped by your past rather than your future.

Paul struggled with this problem. Here was his approach to dealing with his past and present:

If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is the law, blameless.

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:4-14)

Paul was a true and faithful Jew from the royal tribe of Benjamin. He was faultless in keeping the laws of the Pharisees. He was zealous for God. But he considered all these things as rubbish and loss. More than anything else Paul wanted to know, Christ, be found in Him, and become like Him to attain a *future* blessing (resurrection from the dead). In order to focus on the future, he forgot the past. He strained toward the future. He pressed toward the future goal of a heavenly prize.

Paul's real desire was to know Christ and become like Him. You, too, can so order your life under God's direction that you come to know Him, love Him only, and become like Christ. Let your present be molded and shaped by what you are to become in Christ. You were created for eternity!

You need to begin orienting your life to the purposes of God. His purposes go far beyond time and into eternity. Make sure you are investing your life, time, and resources in things that are lasting and not things that will pass away. If you don't recognize that God created you for eternity, you will invest in the wrong direction. You need to store up treasures in heaven.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matt. 6:19-21, 33)

This is why a love relationship with God is so important. He loves you. He knows what is best for you. Only He can guide you to invest your life in worthwhile ways. This guidance will come as you "walk" with Him and listen to Him.

WALKING WITH GOD

God created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, for a love relationship with Himself. After Adam and Eve had sinned, they heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. They hid from Him because of their fear and shame. Try to sense the heart of a loving Father when He asked that wonderful love question, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). God knew that something had happened to the love relationship.

When your relationship is as it ought to be, you will always be in fellowship with the Father. You will be there in His presence expecting and anticipating the relationship of love. When Adam and Eve were not there, something had gone wrong.

Early each day, I have an appointment with God. I often wonder what happens when the God who loves me comes to meet me there. How does He feel when He asks, "Henry, where are you?" and I am just not there. I have found this to be true in my own walk with the Lord: I keep that time alone with God, not in order to have a relationship, but because I have a relationship. Because I have that love relationship with the Lord, I want to meet with Him in my quiet time. I want to spend the time there. Time with Him enriches and deepens the relationship I have with Him.

I hear many persons say, "I really struggle trying to have that time alone with God." If that is a problem you face, let me suggest something to you. Make the priority in your life to come to love Him with all your heart. That will solve most of your problem with your quiet time. Your quiet time is because you know Him and, therefore, love Him, not only in order to learn about Him. The apostle Paul said it was "the love of Christ" that compelled or constrained him (2 Cor. 5:14).

Suppose you were dating a person you loved and intended to marry. What is the primary reason you date (spend time with)

that person? Is it because you want to find out about his likes and dislikes or family background? Is it because you want to find out about her knowledge and education? Or is it because you love him and enjoy being with him?

When two people love each other and plan to marry, they are concerned about finding out information about each other. That is not, however, the primary reason why they date. They spend time together because they love each other and enjoy being together.

Similarly, you will learn much about God, His Word, His purposes, and His ways as you spend time with Him. You will come to know Him during the day as you experience Him working in and through your life. Learning about Him is not, however, why you should want to have a quiet time with Him. The more you know Him and experience His love, the more you will love Him. Then you will want that time alone with Him because you do love Him and enjoy His fellowship.

GOD'S FELLOWSHIP WITH ME

How can I always be in fellowship with the Father? My love relationship with God makes me want to do what each day?

What does time with God do for my relationship with Him? Why do I spend time with God?

REAL, PERSONAL, AND PRACTICAL

The relationship God wants to have with you will be real and personal. Some ask the question, "Can a person actually have a real, personal, and practical relationship with God?" They seem to think that God is far off and unconcerned about their day-to-day living. That is not the God we see in the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation we see God relating to people in real, personal, intimate,

and practical ways. Use your Bible to read the stories described below. Watch to see how the person's relationship with the Lord was very real, practical, and personal.

Adam and Eve. God had intimate fellowship with Adam and Eve, walking in the garden with them in the cool of the day. When they sinned, God came after them to restore the love relationship. He met a very practical need by providing clothing to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3:20-21).

Hagar. Hagar had been used, mistreated, and abused by Sarai. She fled for her life. When she reached the end of her own resources, when she had nowhere else to turn, when all hope was gone, God came to her. In her relationship to God, she learned that God saw her, knew her needs, and would lovingly provide for her. God is very personal (Gen. 16:1-13).

Solomon. Solomon's father, David, had been a man who sought the Lord with his whole heart. Solomon had a heritage of faith and obedience to follow. He had the opportunity to ask and receive anything he wanted from God. Solomon demonstrated his love for God's people by asking for a discerning heart. God granted his request and gave him wealth and fame as well. Solomon found his relationship with God to be very practical (1 Kings 3:5-13).

The Twelve Disciples. The disciples also had a real, personal, and practical relationship with Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus had chosen them to be with Him. What a pleasure it must have been to have such an intimate relationship with Jesus! When they were given a very difficult assignment, Jesus did not send them out helpless. He gave them authority they had never known before over evil spirits (Mark 6:7-13).

Peter in Prison Awaiting Execution. In some places of the world obedience to the Lord results in imprisonment. This was Peter's experience (Acts 12:1-17). In answer to prayer, the Lord miraculously delivered him. This was so dramatic and practical, Peter

first thought it was a dream. The praying Christians thought he was an angel. Soon they all discovered that the Lord's deliverance was real. That deliverance probably saved Peter's life.

John. In exile on the island of Patmos, John was spending the Lord's Day in fellowship with God (Rev. 1:9-20). During this time of fellowship in the Spirit, the revelation of Jesus Christ came to John to "show His servants—things which must shortly take place" (Rev. 1:1). This message has been a genuine challenge and encouragement to the churches from John's day to this.

Do you sense, as you read the Scripture, that God became real and personal to people? Do you sense that their relationship with God was practical? Was He also real and personal to Noah? to Abraham? to Moses? to Isaiah? Yes! Yes! Yes! Has God changed? No! This was true in the Old Testament. It was true during the time of Jesus' life and ministry. It was true after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Your life also can reflect that kind of real, personal, and practical relationship as you respond to God's working in your life.

Love must be real and personal. A person cannot love without another "someone" to love. A love relationship with God takes place between two real beings. A relationship with God is real and personal. This has always been His desire. All His efforts are expended to bring this desire to reality. God is a Person pouring His life into yours.

If, for some reason, you cannot think of a time when your relationship to God has been real, personal, and practical, you need to spend some time evaluating your relationship to Him. Go before the Lord in prayer and ask Him to reveal the true nature of your relationship to Him. Ask Him to bring you into that kind of relationship. If you come to the realization that you have never entered a saving relationship with God, return to the introduction on page 2 for help in settling that most important issue now.

Some people say to me, "Henry, what you are suggesting about doing God's will is not practical in our day." I always have to differ with them. God is a very practical God. He was in Scripture. He is the same today. When He provided manna, quail, and water for the children of Israel, He was being practical. When Jesus fed five thousand, He was being practical. The God I see revealed in biblical times is real, personal, and practical. I just trust God to be practical and real to me too.

The constant presence of God is the most practical part of your life and ministry. Unfortunately we often assign God to a limited place in our lives. Then we call on Him whenever we need help. That is the exact opposite of what we find in the Word of God. He is the One who is working in our world. He invites you to relate to Him so He can accomplish His work through you. His whole plan for the advance of the kingdom depends on His working in real and practical ways through His relationship to His people.

Knowing and experiencing God through a real and personal relationship was practical in the Scriptures. I believe you will find that this kind of walk with God will be exceedingly practical. God can make a practical difference in your relationships in your family, in your church, and with other people. You can encounter God in such a way that you know you are experiencing Him.

SUMMARY

No one seeks after God on his or her own initiative. God takes the initiative to pursue a continuing love relationship with you. That love relationship is very real, personal, and practical. More than anything else that you might do, God wants you to love Him with your total being. He created you for that very purpose. If your love relationship with Him is out of line, everything else related to knowing, doing, and experiencing God's will will be messed up.

When you find you are not receiving assignments from the Lord, focus your attention on the love relationship. God may be waiting until you respond to His loving invitation to a relationship before entrusting an assignment to you.

EXPERIENCING GOD TODAY

Adam and Eve walked with God in the cool of the day. Take some time to "walk with God" and cultivate a more intimate relationship with Him today or this week. If your location, physical condition, and weather permit, find a place outside to walk. Use this time to get out of your routine. You may even want to plan a special trip for part of a day just to be alone with God. The place could be:

- your neighborhood
- a city park
- a garden
- a wooded area in the country
- a lakeshore
- a sandy beach
- a mountain road
- anywhere

Spend the time walking and talking with God. If the location permits, you may even want to talk out loud. Focus your thoughts on your love of your heavenly Father. Praise Him for His love and mercy. Thank Him for expressions of His love to you. Be specific. Express to God your love for Him. Take time to worship Him and adore Him. Then just spend time with Him. Talk to Him about your concerns, and listen to what He may want to say to you.

After your walk, reflect on your feelings. Consider some of the following questions:

- How did you feel as you walked and talked with God?
- What aspect of your love relationship with God did you become aware of?

- If this was a difficult or an emotionally uneasy time, why do you think it was?
- What happened that was especially meaningful or joyful?
- Would this be the kind of experience you might want to repeat on a fairly regular basis? If so, how regular?

MY SURRENDER TO GOD'S LOVE RELATIONSHIP

God, You have shown me again the deep meaning and total necessity of a continuing love relationship with You. Thank You that You love me so much. Forgive me when I fail to spend time with You each day. I commit myself right now to spending time every morning with You before I start my day in other pursuits. Continue to pursue me Father, and show me how to express my love to You in real, personal, and practical ways. Let me be fully aware of the real, personal, and practical ways You are expressing Your love for me. I love You. I worship You. I will serve You in time and for all eternity.