

The 4 Things You Need to Renew Your Holiday Spirit

BY: AUBURN LAYMAN











Refocusing on the Holiday Season

When you think of Christmas, what comes to mind first? A bright green tree laden with homemade ornaments? The pressure of holiday shopping? The joy—or stress—of being surrounded by family? Does Christmas make you feel like you're a part of something or do you feel lonely and anxious at the thought of December 25?

What about the New Year? Do you love the idea of a fresh start or do you roll your eyes at New Year's resolutions? Do you feel overwhelmed by the pressure to have fun plans on December 31 or excited for the excuse to celebrate?

For most of us, it's some combination of all that—and more. The holiday season is . . . well, complicated. Nothing seems as straightforward as the commercials would lead us to believe.

For most of us, the holiday season is complicated.

There are times when I get a little burned out on the holidays. On the one hand, I truly love the season. But on another, I struggle to meet expectations. Sometimes I don't feel merry at all—just exhausted. Not being in the "holiday spirit" makes me feel guilty and even envious of those who are.

When I get like that, it's helpful to remember that there's something bigger at play during the holidays. It often gets buried in shopping and office parties and travel plans, but it's there nonetheless.

How many times have you heard "Jesus is the reason for the season"? It's a trite phrase, but it rings true. Yes, Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. But "the reason for the season" is much more than that.

The holidays are an opportunity to remember the power of hope, peace, joy, and love.

The holiday season can be a tremendous opportunity for us to remember the power of the hope, peace, joy, and love that can be found in Jesus. But to do that, we have to refocus our perspectives and realign our minds and hearts with the core meaning of the holidays.

To get the most out of this guide, I encourage you to read and reflect on one section per day or over the course of a week. It takes time to focus our minds and align our hearts!

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-PSALM 42:5-

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Focus #1: Hope



"I hope I get that job." —A new college graduate

"I hope we can make ends meet this month." —Struggling newlyweds

"I hope my kids don't get the stomach virus going around school." —Every mom ever

Hope. A small, simple word with a huge, complex meaning.

We often use "hope" to talk about things we'd either like to experience or avoid. In this context, hoping for something seems pretty similar to wishing for something. In fact, we could easily rephrase every "hope" above into a wish.

I wish I had a new job.
I wish we weren't always struggling with money.
I wish my kids were healthy all the time.

The problem with wishes is that they're the stuff of birthday cakes and genie lamps.

The problem with wishes is that they're the stuff of birthday cakes and genie lamps. They're insubstantial, filled with maybes and what-ifs: Maybe I'll win the lottery next time. What if I were smarter, funnier, or more attractive?

Perhaps our wishes will come true. Perhaps they won't. There's some doubt, because that's the nature of a wish. (OK, fine, if you get your hands on a genie's lamp, apparently you'll definitely get those three wishes—but you let me know if you ever find one!)

But hope . . . hope is a different thing entirely.

A BROKEN WORLD

According to the Christian faith—and many other religions, too—the world we live in is broken. Something is terribly wrong, and we see evidence of it every day.

Life is full of disappointments and dead ends. We contend with disease, death, and devastation. We belittle, judge, and shame those who are different than us—and we feel belittled, judged, and shamed by others.

The promise of redemption is the hope of the Christian.

At times, the world seems hopeless, damaged beyond repair. But in the Christian understanding, this imperfect world is only temporary.

Christians believe that Jesus will return to earth to restore our world to the way it was created to be. At that time, "'He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. 'There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away."1

This promise of redemption is the hope of the Christian.

CONFIDENT EXPECTATION

The hope presented in the Bible is not a desperate wish that maybe someday things will get better. Biblical hope is the confidence that things will get better. Hope is not a wish but an expectation.

> Hope is not a wish but an expectation.

For Christians, hope is the confident expectation that one day, this world will be renewed. It's the assurance that we are deeply loved by the God who created us and who has put us here on this earth for a purpose. It's the certainty that God's plan for redemption is at work in our world and our lives.

Christians' hope is based in confidence in God's promises.

And this is where faith comes into play. For the Christian, faith and hope are inextricably linked. Faith is the very foundation from which we are able to have hope because "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."2

But how do we know we can have faith in God's promises?

FAITH AND HOPE

The book of Hebrews tells us to "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." That is, we can place our hope in God because we have faith that God is who he says he is, we trust in the past demonstrations of his faithfulness, and we know of his love for us.

After all, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."4 These kinds of demonstrations of God's love for humankind is what gives Christians faith in God.

Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful to us.

The Holy Bible, New International Version © 2011, Revelation 21:4.

² Ibid., Hebrews 11:1.

³ Ibid., Hebrews 10:23.

⁴ Ibid., John 3:16.

The Bible tells us that even when we are faithless, God remains faithful to us.⁵ It's hard to say that about anyone or anything else in this world.

Lamentations 3:22-23 explains it this way: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

LIVING OUT HOPE

But, you might ask, what good is having hope for something so far in the future? What does that have to do with my life right now?

Hope in God and his plan to restore the world has the power to change everything about us. This hope encourages, fortifies, and reassures us.

There are perhaps no verses in the Bible that better describe the hope God offers than these: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

God says that when you look expectantly to him, he provides things that are infinitely more valuable than the things of this world. Through hope in God, we can find peace, freedom, strength, and perseverance. This hope encourages, fortifies, and reassures us. It buoys us in times of trouble.

God acknowledges that this world is hard. He knows we suffer. But he promises the daily renewal of our hearts and minds through the offer of eternal, enduring hope—a hope that shines light into our dark times.

THE DAY WHEN HOPE ENTERED THE WORLD

All of this is summed up in the person of Jesus. Christmas celebrates the moment when God came to the world in human form. It marks not just the birth of a baby in a manger but the entry of hope into a fallen world.

Christmas marks not only the birth of Jesus but the entry of hope into the world.

We celebrate Christmas because the birth of Jesus set God's plan for redemption in motion. The holidays give us an opportunity to remember God's promises and the power of eternal hope.

If you're feeling discouraged by the state of your life, your nation, or the world this holiday season, take heart. There is hope to be found.

⁵ Ibid., 2 Timothy 2:13.

⁶ Ibid., 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.



Focus Your Mind on Hope

- Think of a time when you waited for something you knew was going to happen—a trip, an event, the sharing of good news. Now recall a time when you wished something would happen without knowing if it ever would. How do the two experiences feel different? How does that apply to the world's definition of hope versus the hope God offers?
- What do you find most challenging about the concept of fixing your eyes on what is unseen?

Act on Hope

Read Isaiah 9:1-7. Now go back and focus on Isaiah 9:2. Think about a way you can be "a great light" to someone today. Go and do it!

Align Your Heart with Hope

Walking through the ups and downs of life is an entirely different experience when your heart is filled with confident expectation in God's promises. When you find yourself feeling cynical or doubtful, refer back to 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Remember the promise that your troubles are "light and momentary," even when they seem heavy and permanent. Pray that God would bring you his hope by reminding you of his promises.



AND THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH TRANSCENDS ALL UNDERSTANDING. WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS.

PHILIPPIANS 4:7

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Focus #2: Peace



Have you ever watched someone you love deal with a prolonged illness? It's messy, it's hard, and it's sad.

My dad has been contending with a series of health issues since early 2008. Some of them have been totally random—a leg infection picked up while swimming in a river or a stray piece of wire coming off a grill brush and winding up in his esophagus. I mean, really? How can all this stuff happen to just one guy?

But others are persistent, debilitating, and chronic. There's no humor to be found in them.

It's horrible to feel helpless when watching a loved one fight what may very well be a losing battle. Of course, it's just as awful to be the one fighting. And yet, through these past years, I've witnessed something bewildering in both my mom and dad.

Though their world has been rocked time and again, their identities and faith haven't been.

Somehow, through the roller coaster of emergency room trips, doctor's appointments, and disappointing news, they have remained—at their cores—exactly whom I've always known them to be: steadfast, faithful, dependable, and a little silly.

That's not to say there haven't been bouts of anxiety, depression, and fear. At times, things have felt dark and hopeless. But though their world has been rocked time and again, their identities and their faith haven't been.

How can that be?

A TRANSCENDENT PEACE

I won't make you wait. It all boils down to one thing: "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding." ⁷

Historically, we speak of "times of peace" as seasons without fighting. We wish for "peace and quiet," meaning we want to get away from noise and distraction. It seems that peace is something that requires the absence of stress and strife.

But that's not God's peace. The world's idea of peace is dependent upon external conditions that we ultimately can't control. But God's peace transcends all that.

Having the peace of God means that we can be smack-dab in the middle of the chaos, disappointment, and tension, yet still find a calm and quiet within our hearts, minds, and spirits.

⁷ Ibid., Philippians 4:7.

KNOWING OUR VALUE

What would you say if I were to ask you how you know that your life has value? How about where you get your sense of identity and worth?

Your work? Your relationships? Talent? Intelligence? Possessions?

Those are all common answers, but unfortunately, they're also all unstable sources of identity. Any and all of them can be lost at anytime. If you answered with something like what's written above and you were to lose that part of your life, does that mean you've lost your value, identity, and worth?

Christians believe that our identity is found in something infinitely more secure: God himself.

Absolutely not.

Christians believe that our identity is found in something infinitely more secure: God himself.

Human identity is rooted in the knowledge that the creator of the universe made each of us carefully and intentionally in his own image. In Psalm 139:13-16, the writer praises God for creating him with such love and care:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . . My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

In the Christian understanding, God so valued his creation (that is, humankind—you and me and even the person who most annoys you) so highly that he willingly sacrificed his own son for us. Because of this gift, we can know God personally and discover the power of God's peace for ourselves. It all comes down to Jesus.

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

There are many names for Jesus in the Christian vernacular, but you hear a few of them at Christmas more than any other time of the year. In fact, a common Christmas reading comes from Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Unsurprisingly, we're going to zoom in on the title Prince of Peace. It's a bit of an odd name, but the meaning behind it is beautiful. To get there, though, we have to start with a brief recap of exactly what Christians believe about Jesus.

It goes like this: God came to earth through the person of Jesus. While here, Jesus experienced the emotions and challenges that we deal with every day. Yet, because he was also God, Jesus lived a life free of selfishness or wrongdoing—something you or I could never pull off. He spent his last years traveling and teaching others about God and God's love for all people. He died a sacrificial death on the cross and was buried. But the story didn't end there. Three days later, he was resurrected and reappeared to many people.

For Christians, everything hinges on the resurrection. It was in this moment that Jesus, who lived a life free of sin, overcame the power of sin and death. Through this act, he restored the pathway for us to be forgiven our own sins and have a direct, personal relationship with God.

For Christians, everything hinges on the resurrection.

Now, by putting our faith in Jesus and accepting the gift of his sacrifice, we are able to discover God's peace. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." And because God knows each of us intimately, this peace comes with the assurance that we are seen, known, and cherished.

FINDING PEACE IN THE HOLIDAYS

Despite what advertisements and Hallmark movies would have us believe, the holidays are often anything but peaceful. Expectations and tensions run high. Families fight, travel plans are canceled, and the hustle and bustle gets overwhelming.

But now we can remind ourselves that there is a different kind of peace available to each of us, one that stands apart from these external circumstances. When we place our trust in God, his peace—that incredible, divine peace that we can't even make full sense of—fills us with a pervasive sense of calm and guides us through times of trouble.

So how do we find God's peace? Thankfully, Paul gives us some clear instructions:
Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all.
The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.⁹

Rejoice in the Lord. Be gentle to all. Present your requests to God through prayer.

Rejoice in the Lord. Be gentle to all. Present your requests to God through prayer. Seeking out God's peace this holiday season can make a world of difference for you. "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way." 10

⁸ Ibid., Romans 5:1.

⁹ Ibid., Philippians 4:4-7.



Focus Your Mind on Peace

- When you find yourself in particularly stressful situations, what's your instinctual response? How might you modify your thoughts and behavior to follow Paul's instructions in Philippians 4:4-7?
- Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." How might God's peace lead you to deal with times of conflict?

Act on Peace

The holiday season is filled with opportunities to be a peacemaker. Yes, that could mean trying to mediate the next family argument. But it could also be so much more. Keep a watchful eye for opportunities to help others find peace. Help the dad struggling to corral his kids in the airport. Give a hand to your neighbor as she carries in the groceries. Be gentle with yourself and others.

Align Your Heart with Peace

How can you rejoice in the Lord?

• For one day, write down every good, happy, or fulfilling experience. Thank God for those moments, celebrating them together with him.

How can you be gentle to all?

 Identify the situations in which you're most likely to let your anger or frustration get the best of you. When you see the potential for one of those situations, pause and ask God to fill you with grace, gentleness, and peace before you interact with anyone.

How can you remember to pray to God?

Set an hourly reminder on your phone to prioritize developing a pattern of prayer.
It's OK if it feels a little weird when you start. Remember that prayer need not be
formal; it's really as simple as having a conversation with God, whether silently,
out loud, or by writing in a journal.

If you're interested in learning more about how to experience God's peace in your daily life, check out this article: https://www.exploregod.com/experience-god-in-your-daily-life.





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Focus #3: Joy



Luke 2 tells the story of Mary giving birth to Jesus in a manger. Soon thereafter, an angel appears to a group of shepherds in a nearby field. The first thing the angel says to them is, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."

What does that tell us about Christmas? That it marks a day of great joy! Tremendous joy, in fact, because on that very day, "in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." ¹²

Christmas is meant to be a time of great rejoicing, a season of celebration.

Christmas is meant to be a time of great rejoicing, a season of celebration. But if that's the case, why is it that every year, we see spikes in depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness? Where's the joy?

HUNTING FOR HAPPINESS

We're all aware of the disappointments this world brings. We chase after everything we're supposed to want or need: wealth, power, pleasure, security, success, self-improvement. We spend time, money, and energy trying to experience everything we can. We look high and low for something that will bring us lasting happiness—and there's no shortage of things to try.

But it seems that nothing satisfies us for long. No matter how many health kicks we go on or how much we focus on positive thinking, it's just a matter of time before we're left feeling curiously discontent again, with a nagging sensation that there must be something more to life.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever worked really hard to get something you badly wanted, something you were sure was going to be *it*—the thing that would totally change your life and make you happy forever?

When I graduated from college, I thought I knew the path laid before me. I'd worked hard for four years; now it was time to put that degree to use with a job I loved. I'd been dating someone for just about those same four years; I knew we were going to get married. I chased after those things, assuming that once I had a career and a marriage, all would be right in my world.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible*, Luke 2:10.

But the reality was much different. Though I enjoyed parts of my work, my job was crushing me. And though I loved my boyfriend, our relationship just wasn't right. I was unhappy despite everything I'd done to avoid just that.

Eventually, neither the job nor the relationship were in my life anymore. I was back at square one and feeling confused. I had done everything right. Didn't God want me to be happy?

THE NATURE OF HAPPINESS

I'd guess that if I were to ask you the three things you most want out of life, some version of "to be happy" would be on your list. It's a natural inclination.

The problem, though, is that happiness is fleeting. It's fickle, hard to pin down and force to stick around. For one thing, our happiness depends largely on our circumstances. And the fact is, more often that we'd like to admit, our circumstances are mostly out of our control.

When we say we're searching for happiness, we're looking for something permanent.

I think that when we say we're searching for happiness, we're looking for something permanent. We want a sense of contentment that isn't swayed by the changing tides of life.

This is where joy comes into play.

HAPPINESS AND HOLINESS

Just as God created this entire universe, he also created happiness and pleasure. Have you ever heard someone say that God doesn't want us to be happy; he cares only if we are holy? Or that Christians think pleasure is bad? There are kernels of truth in these statements, but unfortunately, they miss the bigger picture—and they can be damaging.

The fact is, Christians believe that just as God created this entire universe, he also created happiness and pleasure. And God created only things that are consistent with his nature—things that are good and beautiful. After all, every aspect of creation was originally "very good."¹³

This means that happiness and pleasure, too, are inherently good things when viewed, balanced, and pursued in the right way. The fact is, most Christians believe that God wants us to be filled with a deep, overwhelming, permanent joy that the world and its disappointments can't touch.

¹³ Ibid., Genesis 1:31.

Jesus once said, "Everyone who drinks this water [from a well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." It sounds a little weird, I know, but it's foundational to understanding biblical joy.

Everyone who looks for happiness where the world tells them they will find it—wealth, fame, relationships—will be discontent again. But those who discover and embrace God's eternal joy will have their thirst quenched. God is offering something unlike anything we can find in this world.

God wants us to be filled with a deep, overwhelming, permanent joy that the world and its disappointments can't touch.

FINDING JOY IN GOD

So how do we do it then? How do we find our joy in God?

Thankfully, we get a pretty clear picture in the Bible. The psalmist says to God: "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." "I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches." 16

We find joy in God by spending time in his presence and being obedient to his word. When we live faithfully according to God's wisdom, we begin to discover the contentment Paul referred to when he wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through [Christ] who gives me strength."

Joy comes from within us.

By the way, do you know where he was when he wrote that? A prison cell in Rome. Do you think there was much in that prison that would make him happy? Of course not. But what he did have was a deep, in-dwelling joy that gave him contentment and strength.¹⁷

Whereas happiness often depends on external forces, joy comes from within us. Of course, when we have joy, we often have happiness too. The two aren't mutually exclusive or contrasting concepts. The difference is that we can be joyful people while sitting on the floor of a prison cell with nothing "happy" around us.

¹⁴ Ibid., John 4:13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid., Psalm 16:11.

¹⁶ Ibid., Psalm 119:97.

¹⁷ Ibid., Philippians 4:11-13.

JESUS'S OBEDIENCE

We can learn even more about joy by looking to Jesus, who "for the joy set before him . . . endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." ¹⁸

It seems counterintuitive to say that Jesus endured the cross because of joy. But the key is this: in this verse, joy isn't defined as being free to do whatever we want but in terms of obeying God's will.

Jesus didn't *want* to endure the crucifixion. In fact, on the night of his arrest, he prayed that he wouldn't have to: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." But in the very next breath, he says, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." Description of the prayed that he wouldn't have to: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." But in the very next breath, he says, "Yet not my will, but yours be done."

Jesus's obedience made it possible for us to access God's joy as well.

The crucifixion itself brought Jesus no joy—of course not. But Jesus prioritized obedience, knowing the importance of following God's will. Through his incredible act of obedience, joy was found in the resurrection.

And beyond even that, Jesus's obedience made it possible for us to access God's joy as well, because we can now pursue a personal relationship with him.

LASTING JOY

During the holidays, our unhappiness can become even more apparent to us as we view it in contrast to others' merriment. Our loneliness can feel more oppressive as we watch others enjoy time with family and friends.

But it doesn't have to be that way. The instinct to hunt for happiness is intended to help point us to the creator of true joy. When we replace the pursuit of generic happiness with the persistent pursuit of obedience to God, we discover a true joy that gives us strength and lasting contentment.

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¹⁸ Ibid., Hebrews 12:2.

¹⁹ Ibid., Luke 22:42.



Focus Your Mind on Joy

- President Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Do you
 find yourself more likely to compare yourself to others during the holidays? What
 kind of impact does that have on your ability to feel joy? How can you resist the
 tendency to compare?
- How do you feel about the idea that joy can be found in obedience to God?

Act on Joy

The joy of Christmas can seem like it's centered on gifts and trips. But there are also endless opportunities to spread joy through acts of service to others. You can volunteer through a church or nonprofit, or you can serve your family and friends in more personal ways. Whatever you choose, joyfully serve someone this week!

Align Your Heart with Joy

Micah 6:8 says, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Memorize this verse over the next few days. Hold it at the forefront of your heart and let it guide your actions.



AND NOW THESE THREE REMAIN

BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE & LOVES 1 CORINTHIANS 15:15

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Focus #4: Love



When I was growing up, *Moulin Rouge* was one of my favorite movies.²¹ I thought it was so romantic—not to mention that having Nicole Kidman's hair was my preteen dream. But there's one particular scene in the movie that still sticks out in my memory.

A writer named Christian has just met a singer named Satine and, of course, has already fallen for her. She's resistant to the idea of pursuing a relationship with him for a variety of reasons, one of them being that she can't risk falling in love with anyone.

Christian is horrified at the thought of living a life without love. He exclaims, "Love is like oxygen! Love is a many-splendored thing. Love lifts us up where we belong. All you need is love!" As Satine voices her objections, he responds only with, "All you need is love."

Eventually, in the timespan of a singular love song, Christian breaks down her defenses.

Moulin Rouge is hardly the first (or last) story to employ the "all you need is love" angle. After all, Christian's refrain echoes that written by The Beatles.²² Even the Bible agrees that love is the most powerful force in the whole world.²³

But are Moulin Rouge, The Beatles, and the Bible all talking about the same thing?

UNDERSTANDING LOVE

If I were to ask a dozen people to define what love is, I'd likely get twelve different answers. When I type "love" into Google, I immediately get 16.63 *billion* results.

Like "hope," "love" is another word that we throw around like confetti. I love my husband, but I also love cookies. I love gardening and cooking, my friends and my cat. In all those instances, does "love" have the same meaning? The same depth? The same significance?

Like "hope," "love" is another word that we throw around like confetti.

To answer these questions, it can be helpful to start from the beginning—a shocking idea, I know. In this case, that means answering the question of where love came from.

Some scientists believe that love is just a chemical reaction in our minds and bodies that leads us to act on instincts to procreate. From this view, the love we feel doesn't amount to much more than our genes ensuring that we experience the chemical processes necessary to make sure the species continues.

²¹ Baz Luhrman and Craig Pearce, *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrman, (Bazmark Productions, June 1, 2001).

²² Lennon-McCartney, "All You Need Is Love," Parlophone Records Limited, released July 7, 1967.

²³ See *The Holy Bible*, 1 Corinthians 13:13.

But this fails to explain a huge portion of how love motivates us as humans. We constantly give of ourselves for those we love—our spouses, children, friends, and even pets—sometimes to the point of sacrificing our own lives. This drive toward self-sacrifice often outpaces our drive for self-preservation.

Many point to these selfless acts as evidence that love comes from something outside of us—something beyond our own body chemistry. Those who believe in a higher power often tie in love with that spiritual force. For Christians, the answer is clear: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."²⁴

THE LOVE OF A PARENT

Within the Bible, love is a big deal. Like, a *really* big deal. In a letter to the church members in the city of Corinth, Paul makes it clear that love is "the most excellent way":²⁵

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.²⁶

Love is what makes all other gifts and talents worthwhile. No matter what we do, if we do it without love, it's worthless.

There are also countless verses that talk of God's love for us. The Bible often uses parent-child language to describe the relationship between God and humans to help us understand God's deep and abiding love for us.

No matter what we do, if we do it without love, it's worthless.

As we've discussed, Christians believe that God has been nurturing, protecting, and guiding each one of us since we were knit together in our mothers' wombs. We're even encouraged to call God "our Father."²⁷

But perhaps the best illustration of God as Father can be found in relation to Jesus. Time and again, Jesus refers to God as his Father and to himself as the Son.²⁸ He makes clear that he and God the Father are one²⁹; that, as the Son, he can do whatever the Father does³⁰; and that the Father loves the Son.³¹

And now, we get to the crux of it all.

²⁴ Ibid., 1 John 4:16.

²⁵ Ibid., 1 Corinthians 12:31.

²⁶ Ibid., 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

²⁷ Ibid., Matthew 9:6.

²⁸ See, for example, *The Holy Bible*, John 2:16; 3:16–18; 5:17–47

²⁹ The Holy Bible, John 10:30.

³⁰ Ibid., John 5:19.

³¹ Ibid., John 5:20.

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

Here's where we find the major way this kind of love departs from the romantic love in *Moulin Rouge* and songs by The Beatles. God's love for us is unconditional. We cannot earn it; we can't do enough "good deeds" to deserve it. It's given freely to all.

As a parent loves their baby before the child is even born, so does God love us before even our parents even born. We need not sing him a love song to convince him that we're worthy of a shot at earning his love.

God's love for us is unconditional.

Jesus's death on the cross for our sins was the ultimate demonstration of God's love: This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.³²

Jesus's willing sacrifice of his own life set the stage for a relationship of reciprocal love between us and God—and therefore us and the people around us. In fact, we're told that Jesus's sacrifice is "how we know what love is." 33

THE ONLY THING THAT COUNTS

We can see through God's example that love is something to be *done*, not just *felt*. Love is not intended to be only a quiet, private, internal feeling. It's meant to spur us to action. Ever heard that cliché, "Love is a verb"? Well, it's a cliché because it's true!

"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." —Galatians 5:6

When Paul writes to the Christian communities in Galatia, he says something I find so profound. "The only thing that counts," he says, "is faith expressing itself through love." ³⁴

The holidays are the busiest, most hectic time of the year for so many. For others, it's much too quiet—a reminder of things missing. But imagine if we all remembered "the only thing that counts." What better way to spend the holidays than focused on expressing your faith through love for others?

³² Ibid., 1 John 4:9-12.

³³ Ibid., 1 John 3:16.



Focus Your Mind on Love

- Christians often say that "Jesus died for you and me." Even if you've heard that many times before, how does it make you feel in light of what we've just discussed about God's love?
- In 1 John 4:18, we read that "perfect love drives out fear." What does that tell you about the power of God's love for you?

Act on Love

In John 13:34–35, Jesus says, "'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." For one full day, actively focus on following Jesus's command. See how many ways you can act out of love instead of anger, laziness, or fear.

Align Your Heart with Love

In the video "Love Personified," Hugh Halter says, "I think most people think love is fleeting. It moves and changes and . . . is not something that's stable. . . . It's not freely given [and] you hardly ever experience love without some conditions. But that's not true." Watch this short video to explore if there really is such a thing as unconditional love: https://www.exploregod.com/love-personified-video.

Christians believe that God's love is offered freely to everyone through the gift of salvation. There are no prerequisites or limitations. The beautiful thing is that you don't need to get your life in order or try to erase your past before you can have a relationship with God. God accepts you as you are. And those who believe and embrace this gift get to experience the hope, peace, joy, and love of a relationship with God.

If you're interested in learning more about how to commit (or recommit) your life to God, email your questions to info@ExploreGod.com. We'd love to talk with you!



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