

RESCUED FROM
SHAME-BASED RELIGION,
RELEASED INTO THE
LIFE-GIVING LOVE OF JESUS

F R E E

A person wearing a denim jacket and black pants is captured mid-jump, arms outstretched, over a rocky cliff edge. The background shows a vast, misty mountain valley with rolling hills and a sea of clouds. The overall mood is one of freedom and liberation.

J. KEVIN BUTCHER

One of the great challenges of being a Christian is learning to live into the freedom that Jesus offers us. In theory, it is an easy concept to grasp, but it's a difficult one to live out. Kevin Butcher so masterfully teaches us how we can take concrete steps toward that path. This book will leave you feeling inspired and empowered to break free from bondage as you fall into the loving arms of our Father.

PETER AHN, lead and founding pastor of Metro Community Church in Englewood, NJ

There is love that sets you free from the need to perform, achieve, strive, and earn. Such unapologetic love is found in Jesus. In the pages of *Free*, the veil between author J. Kevin Butcher's words and the love of Jesus is so thin; you will be overwhelmed, reader, by Butcher's nurturing invitation into your own belovedness. In these pages, your soul will be nourished and compelled to love God, others, and yes, even yourself freely.

AUBREY SAMPSON, church planter and pastor at Renewal Church, West Chicago, IL; speaker; and author of *The Louder Song* and *Overcomer*

Kevin is a master storyteller who beautifully articulates the transformative power of God's liberating covenant love. He helps move theology from the head to the heart and provides examples and pathways to genuinely live free.

ROBERT LEE, president and CEO of Pioneer Circuits

Defining a thing creates opportunities to see the thing through new lenses, strategize, and move accordingly. In this revelatory offering, Pastor Kevin unpacks the multilayered stronghold of shame while guiding us to the pathway to freedom. *Free* is an authentic, transparent conversation on the front porch with Kevin. It is heart-level communication from the Father, through Butcher, to his beloved. *Free* is an invitation to see, wrestle, and win. Each page creates space for the ah-has, tears, and screams necessary to move out of bondage and live FREE.

REV. WILLIAM MACK, pastor of Grace Community Covenant Church in Louisville, KY

Kevin Butcher understands better than anyone that Christians can drift from the love of Jesus into shaming religiosity. He writes about the love of Jesus

so well that it's hard to believe that he, too, was rescued from the prison of performance Christianity. I was there. It's all true.

ED UNDERWOOD, president of Recentered Group, author of *When God Breaks Your Heart* and *Reborn to Be Wild*

I've met a lot of people who know a lot *about* Jesus. I don't know nearly as many who truly *know* Jesus. Kevin Butcher is most definitely the latter. Through this book, allow him to be your gentle, experienced guide away from "just do it" Christianity and a life of shame and into the freeing, healing embrace of Jesus' extravagant love.

ANGIE WARD, PHD, assistant director of DMin at Denver Seminary, author of *I Am a Leader*

This book is for those searching for more than just help in their spiritual growth. It is a practical guide for followers of Jesus who desire to enter the amazing freedom offered us in Christ. Kevin clearly describes this freedom and provides practical help in its pursuit. He reminds us that this freedom is found in embracing the love of Jesus and continually abiding in his love. You'll be helped and transformed as you read and apply what Kevin has explained for us all.

TOM YEAKLEY, author of *Growing Kingdom Character* and *Growing Kingdom Wisdom*

If you've never sat down and had a conversation with Kevin Butcher, you're about to. His deep love for God overflows and touches every person he meets, and that love flows through every word on the page. He's a passionate and skillful storyteller, and through this book, he graces us with a deeper experience of God's love. It's a timely message for those of us who've grown weary on the road of faith. Kevin speaks as one who doesn't just know *about* Jesus; he *knows* Jesus. And that is a gift to us all.

LEEANN SHAW YOUNGER, writer, speaker, cofounder and lead pastor of Cityview Church in Pittsburgh, PA

Kevin Butcher has penned a winner on how we practically experience and live out what it means to abide in Christ and his incredible love for us. This is not a dry theology book or another how-to book filled with suggestions for trying

harder and being more disciplined. Butcher, with incredible authenticity, soaks us in the love of God for us that ignites a divine reaction in our hearts. Reading this book will be a spiritual experience for you.

BILL TELL, Navigator representative, author of *Lay It Down*

Too many of us are still trying too hard, still making too many commitments, and still starving on the same table scraps. Thank God for Kevin Butcher, who introduces us to a God who sets us free from religious performance by simply loving us.

STEVE WIENS, pastor at Genesis Covenant Church, Robbinsdale, MN; author of *Shining Like the Sun*

I have known Kevin for over thirty years. He is the real deal, and this book is the real deal. Every story and every point in this book is rooted in rugged and raw experience—doing real life with a real God. The shackles truly can be loosened, and freedom in Jesus can be a reality. This book will show you how.

JAMIE RASMUSSEN, senior pastor at Scottsdale Bible Church, Scottsdale, AZ; author of *How Joyful People Think*

Kevin Butcher's passion for God and his word led him, through his own journey of faith, to discover the beating heart of God's unconditional love for each one of us. *Free* is a spring of fresh water that falls on the parched ground of rules-based Christianity. It will quench the thirst of everyone who has believed the lie that they must earn God's love. Theologically and historically grounded in Scripture, Kevin, with gut-honest truth, shares his own journey, as a follower of Jesus and pastor, into the freedom that comes from intimacy with Christ. Kevin Butcher has written a book about God's love that is a love letter to the church.

PAMELA E. PANGBORN, DMIN, pastor of Hope Community Church in Detroit, MI

When I was twenty, Kevin Butcher led me out of a “just do it” brand of Christianity and into a real relationship with Jesus. For thirty-six years, Kevin has passionately and faithfully pointed me back to Jesus, again and again. His transparent journey and personal insights into the surrendered life of living in Jesus' love, described in these pages, will point *you* back to Jesus for the

freedom and life he longs for you to experience. Back to Jesus' deep heart of love for you and his beautiful invitation to abide in that love. Kevin's insights and personal journey are like a treasure map from a trusted guide.

MIKE FANNING, pastor of Idaville First Church of God, Idaville, IN

In a world shackled with shame, chained to contempt, and held hostage by hatred and guilt, we need to be *Free*. We all need the truths of this book! Butcher has a profoundly simple—yet simply profound—way of sharing the power of God's love and the freedom that comes when we wholeheartedly embrace it! If I could pour the truths of this book into every human being I know, I would! Why? Because we all need to be *Free*!

REV. LAWRENCE C. GLASS, JR., pastor of El Bethel Baptist Church, Redford, MI

FREE

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SHAME-BASED RELIGION,
RELEASED INTO THE
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J. KEVIN BUTCHER

NavPress 

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for
Andrea
Leigh Anne
Caroline

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Love (III)

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.*

*But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.*

*"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here":
 Love said, "You shall be he."*

*"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee."*

*Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"*

*"Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."*

*"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
 "My dear, then I will serve."*

*"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.*

GEORGE HERBERT (1593-1633),
ANGLICAN CLERGYMAN

Introduction

YOU CAN'T STOP LOVE

IT WAS 1959, the dead of winter in a small town in northern Indiana, and I was sitting on a rock-hard church pew alongside my parents for the Sunday-evening worship service. From my five-year-old viewpoint, the pastor seemed larger than life and a million miles away as he concluded his sermon with maybe the most famous verse in the New Testament:

God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

JOHN 3:16, ESV, EMPHASIS ADDED

By that time in the service, other kids my age were either asleep or tearing pages out of the church hymnal. But I couldn't stop listening. As the pastor described the magnificent sacrificial love for each of us

that compelled Jesus of Nazareth to embrace the Cross, I knew he was talking about Jesus going to that cross . . . for five-year-old me.

None of it makes sense, really. I was too young, the pastor too inaccessible, the description of the gospel too grown-up, too sophisticated, too religious—and why was my kindergarten self even paying attention to the old guy’s sermon in the first place? David Crowder’s lyric comes to mind: “You can’t stop love.”¹ On that blustery Indiana night, Jesus loved me enough to come and rescue me, to draw my tender heart—already wounded by the pain of life—to his compassionate arms.

My home was Christian—but full of broken people. I often felt unseen, misunderstood, and lonely. Shame already colored my view of myself; even at the age of five, I lived with an overwhelming sense of never being enough. But that evening, as I listened to the pastor talk about Jesus, I felt what the woman at the well must have felt, and Zacchaeus and the leper in Luke 5 when they first met the Savior—or Galilee’s children when he picked them up and blessed them. I felt seen, accepted, embraced. Maybe for the first time ever, I felt emotionally safe. I felt enough.

So, as I listened to the pastor’s final invitation to believe in Jesus, my little boy hand flew up and out of the pew. I felt like I was simply saying yes to the love I was thirsty for. Saying yes to home. I wasn’t offered a choice between heaven and hell. I didn’t know anything about the various historic views of the Atonement, or the meaning of words like *justification* or *redeemed*. All I remember is being compelled—by love.

So that winter evening sixty years ago, I met the most powerful, redemptive force in the universe: the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. It was glorious, and even at the age of five, I knew I had to have more.

And then . . . I didn’t. Sure, I’d get an occasional, fleeting glimpse

of his love in the years to come. My first year at Taylor University, the Jesus-movement group Love Song was our homecoming entertainment, and I wanted the night to last forever because I felt five years old again as the band passionately sang “feel the love the Son of God can bring.”² And yes, during those decades, I had some coaches, professors, friends—and eventually, an amazing wife—who not only followed Jesus but at times loved me and others well.

But here’s the tragic reality: It was *over three decades* before I deeply and consistently experienced Jesus’ love again.

Abide

What about you? If I asked, “Do you know, really know, that God loves you? Not just the world or your best friend—but *you*?” how would you respond? Some of us might immediately think of Bible verses to prove that we know God’s love, but that’s not the point. If I were to ask my grown daughter Andrea how she knows that I love her and hear that her only assurance was a card I sent her on her seventh birthday signed “love, Dad”—it would break my heart. Words alone can never take the place of a sustained, deep experience of love . . . not even inspired words from biblical text.

Or perhaps you’re frustrated because you’ve felt the love of God, but very inconsistently. You assume a steadier life of walking in his love just isn’t possible. Or if it is, you don’t have a clue as to how to make it so. Maybe, dear friend, even now you’re crying out from a lonely, broken place in your heart, *I want to believe there is something more to knowing Jesus than rules and trying harder. But I really wonder if Jesus’ patient, unconditional love is available to someone . . . like me?*

You’re not alone. So many of us who follow Jesus resist a “love of Jesus”-centered theology of the Christian life. Maybe we view God as

our coach, and we're always trying to cut a tenth of a second off our "spiritual 40-yard dash time"; or we see him as our professor, so we're constantly cramming more spiritual information into our left brains; or we imagine him as our personal spiritual truant officer, scrutinizing our lives for misdemeanors and marching us off to spiritual jail.

But here is the great tragedy: Very few of us see God as our Healer, our Deliverer, our Father—deeply in love with us as his sons and daughters, calling us above all else to love him deeply in return. When we don't live in this "he really loves me" reality, our walk with Jesus is full of duty, fear, shame, and commands we find impossible to keep. The security, freedom, joy, and power of his transformative love is nowhere in sight. Many not only are discouraged but have simply checked out. They are dying. And I'm done standing by, watching them—watching you—die.

Not that I have this all figured out. Full disclosure: Before I started writing this book about living saturated in the love of God, I had to go back to Scripture one . . . more . . . time to ask, *Is the love of God really it? Is his love really the core spiritual substance that fills us, secures us, and launches us into battle against the powers of darkness? Is his love really the key to walking with Jesus? Not just for me, but for my struggling brothers and sisters, whom I love so dearly?*

In my search, I found myself once again in John 13–17, where Jesus, in his last pre-resurrection night on the planet, sends out his closest eleven followers with detailed instructions about what they need to carry on his work. As I read, one particular Jesus saying flew off the page:

As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; *abide in My love.*

JOHN 15:9, EMPHASIS ADDED

I'd taught these words many times over the years, but *this* time they landed with fire in a place inside me where God speaks, and I know it's him. So I dug a little deeper, searching the most respected commentaries on John's Gospel for more perspective. One scholar's words almost took my breath away: He suggested that Jesus' call to "abide in My love" is "perhaps the nearest approach to an authoritative command in John to obey a . . . spiritual precept."³

In other words, out of all Jesus said to the disciples in John 13–17, and even John's entire Gospel, this is most important: *As you follow me, above all else you must abide in my love.*

The word *abide* is a favorite of John's, both in his Gospel and his letters, and means to "live, dwell, lodge"—sometimes with the connotation of remaining or continuing.⁴ Jesus chose this word intentionally to call his disciples into an all-encompassing, comprehensive, intensely focused way of being with him and his love as they walked with him into their broken world and battled hell in his name. If Jesus stood before us today, issuing the same marching orders to us as spiritual descendants of his original eleven, he might say it like this:

My brothers and sisters, this is it—making your home in my love is how you walk with me and work with me to bring my healing Kingdom to our wounded world. Choose to dwell in my love, and even when hell is at your doorstep, my love will surround you, protect you, empower you, and set you free. Because my love isn't just important to your journey—*my love is everything.*

Weary follower of Jesus, are you getting this? It's not how much we study and work and try and confess and agonize and sweat. No—God's love is the *how* of the journey, the life we've been missing and

longing for. This love will cover, sustain, and free us to walk powerfully with him, no matter what the enemy brings. It's a love that will lead us all the way home.

When my two oldest girls, Andrea and Leigh Anne, were small, my wife Carla and I took them to a cabin on Lake Huron for a few days of family time. The first afternoon, as we walked the beach, Carla purposely lagged behind and secretly took a picture that I treasure. The sky is gray, a steep embankment covered by pine trees is on our left, a bit of fog hovers over the water to our right, and straight ahead, a seemingly endless stretch of rocky sand. Then, in the center of the picture, walking together on the coastal pathway—me and my two little girls. Andrea, in her yellow jacket, holding tightly to her daddy's hand, and little three-year-old Leigh Anne, tiny arm fully extended, barely reaching my fatherly grasp. It's an image you can feel—my tenderness toward my girls, their confidence in my strength and care. No fear. No need to perform. No worries about keeping up. No thought of where they're going. All they know is a moment-by-moment peace and freedom of walking with me, secure in my love. *Exactly the kind of peace and freedom Jesus intends for us when he invites us to make our home in his love.*

Listen: I'm deeply aware I don't have all the answers about what it means to walk surrounded by Jesus' love. No one does. There's no way for me to write anything close to comprehensive about how we can live in a loving relationship with the all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal Logos of God, who presently exists outside of time and space and simultaneously says he is always with us. But what I *can* do is share what I've personally learned—however imperfectly—about abiding in his love from Scripture and church history in four decades of study and teaching, along with what I've gleaned from the lives of hundreds of Christ followers I've been privileged to walk with along

the way. Most importantly, I can vulnerably pour out *my* life—my broken, stumbling, empowering journey into the mystery of Jesus' powerful, healing love, that, after all my years of living in spiritual prison . . . is setting me free.

I get it that in Western Christianity, we don't like mystery. We prefer the concrete, the certain. Steps. Equations. Results. But intimate relationships are never like that. They are full of mystery. And frankly, I'm tired of cliché-filled, easy-answer, tightly packaged descriptions of our life with Jesus Christ—because none of these describe real relationship. Raw, authentic, unpredictable, elusive, powerful, intimate, overwhelming, irresistible, maddening, breathtaking—and yes, often deeply mysterious: These are the emotions I've come to experience in all my deepest relationships, including my daily sojourn with Jesus.

In life with Carla, I can point out certain things over the last forty-three years that have deepened our relationship. But I can't imagine telling her—ever—that what guides my journey with her is a list of ten directives I discipline myself to follow day after day in wooden, linear fashion! Intimacy doesn't follow a script. The closest of relationships are filled with images of affection, the aroma and fragrance of familiarity. And light—the light of deep and powerful love—pointing in a clear direction. In our life with God, we're not given a catalog of steps but a light and a love from a Father who never stops watching us with great affection, hovering over us with profound care and moving toward us with fatherly compassion and wisdom. Not because we've performed spiritually and won his approval—but simply because we are his beloved sons and daughters.

So, if on this journey into God's deep love, you want a more fool-proof spiritual path—a step-by-step sheet of instructions like when you're building a set of boxed bookshelves for your den—or if you want a journey more guaranteed in terms of comfortable, cultural

Christian niceties along the way, you'll need to find another book to read. And, in truth, you'll need to find a different spirituality altogether. Because that's not the kind of path Jesus offers. Ever.

But he *does* offer a path. I'm praying that in the pages of this book, you will discern a mysterious yet well-lit *relational* pathway to Jesus' heart that is broad enough to include every kind of Jesus follower—male and female, old and young; every unique personality and nuanced ethnic background; every human experience of clarity and confusion, joy and sorrow. Because, hear this, son or daughter of God: *You and your story* are invited by Jesus himself into this mysterious, lifelong embrace of his love.

In fact, I believe our one great Love is with us right now. Not in some far-off galaxy but *here*, right beside me in the coffee shop where I'm writing and beside you wherever you are reading, just across the veil . . . in glory. He's with us and he loves us and he's waiting. His powerful, all-embracing hand of love is extended over history, his voice still echoing from that last moment with his eleven closest followers. And his invitation—his call on our lives—is still the same: *Abide. Abide in my love.*

The Barrier to Abiding

But because abiding in the love of Jesus is not only freeing but also spiritually powerful, we can expect pushback from the powers of darkness. Tragically, sometimes this persistent, insidious pushback comes through the message of the church. In fact, too often, followers of Jesus find themselves living under the life-sucking power of what shapes our Christianity when the love of Jesus isn't everywhere and everything: an ever-present, seemingly infinite list of religious rules.

When I was a teenager, my church friends and I were told over

and over to “abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV). These words of Paul, always shared out of proportion and context, were accompanied by many devotionals and sermons on how to grit our spiritual teeth and discipline ourselves to obey a stern God who was constantly warning us with a shameful glare that if we didn’t keep the rules, we weren’t really “saved.” We were told, “Repent harder, and pray the sinner’s prayer again!” And again. And again. One normal, adolescent thought about sex, or an accidental swear word on the baseball field—and apparently, in God’s eyes, we were done. Jesus, too, always seemed at least mildly angry with us. No matter what we did for him, it was never quite enough. In all honesty, I felt hopeless and absolutely hated being a Christian—feelings I wasn’t supposed to have and was afraid to share. But even if I’d have had the courage to open up . . . there was no one to tell.

After high school and years of a steady training table of rules, many of my friends said, “I’m done” and walked away from Christianity altogether. I, however, dutifully chose to stick around and simply did my disciplined best to cope with a death-dealing lifestyle of shame. Over the next two decades, the rules themselves changed a bit—the list became less about never having a beer and more about rigorous adherence to the spiritual disciplines or never missing a chance to share my faith—but the point was still . . . the rules.

I call this kind of religion “just do it” Christianity—the veiled heresy that following Jesus is simply about Bible knowledge and trying really hard. In other words, as long as we know what the Scripture says and how it applies to a difficult situation, temptation, or sin pattern, all we need to do is step up to the plate, with Jesus as our cheerleader—and “just do it.”

But this brand of Christianity has never worked and never will. In fact, the illusion of faith by sheer determination was exactly what

led me to despair and near suicide as a young pastor. It is also this hellish, counterfeit variant of the Christian faith that I have watched, over the years, drain the life out of countless sincere believers, leaving them profoundly discouraged and disillusioned.

But, my brothers and sisters, it doesn't have to be this way. If you're absolutely wasted by "just do it" Christianity, sick of the grinding guilt and shame of walking an exhausting path of attempted spiritual discipline and obedience to an endless list of commands, if you long with an aching heart to give bleeding-out humanity a gospel powerful enough to heal their deepest relational wounds—Jesus Christ and his abiding love are available . . . and waiting. All you need is the courage to begin—or deepen—your own mysterious, empowering love relationship with the One who loves *you* with his everlasting love.

The Urgency of Abiding

Early one summer morning, as I sipped coffee on my back porch, I checked my phone for news and messages—and an avalanche of pain bled through the screen:

- > A precious, five-year-old daughter of God bludgeoned to death in a seedy urban Detroit hotel by her mother's boyfriend—plus two dozen marks of abuse discovered on her toddler brother . . .
- > A thirteen-year-old from a developing country, abandoned by her mother and alcoholic father, standing next to three younger siblings she was now responsible for feeding and protecting . . .
- > A text from a close friend, desperate and guilt-ridden about her broken daughter's third DUI and inevitable prison time . . .

Overwhelmed, I stopped reading . . . and wept. Of course, in my sixty-five years on the planet—and almost four decades as a pastor—I've seen and experienced plenty of pain. But this moment and these tears were different. I didn't just feel deep sadness but frustration and anger. Jesus of Nazareth, who preached and lived a powerful, sacrificial love that body-slammed death, calls all who follow him, above all else, to abide in that same powerful love (John 15:9). We who follow Jesus have the answer to the pain right in front of us—yet the pain seems to be mercilessly, continuously winning.

Do you feel this overwhelming pain—your own and the world's? Don't despair. This is the truth: Because of the healing power of Jesus' love, the enemy doesn't get to win. Yes, we're still surrounded by brokenness and death, but Satan's power is limited—he's not allowed to freely wander the planet pulling off his hellish agenda of murdering children, starving families, or breaking our spirits with depression, dysfunction, addiction, and abandonment. Why? Because the love of the Father that breathed life into Jesus' crucified body is available *to us* for our personal battle with the powers of darkness—and because *through us*, God promises to bring the full force of that same healing love of Jesus anytime Satan attacks God's sons and daughters, anywhere in the world. That is, if we choose to *abide*.

New Testament theologian N. T. Wright says it like this:

When Jesus died, the “powers” lost their power. They can still rage and shout, but the power of Jesus is stronger. . . . The past is blotted out. A new world has begun. A *revolution* has begun, in which power itself is redefined as the power of love. . . .

. . . Nothing in all creation can stop this all-powerful love.⁵

Abiding in the love of Jesus isn't optional. This is life or death—my life, your life, literally every precious life on the planet. Everything else—in our faith, our theology, our each-and-every-day experience—is secondary to our abiding experience of the love of God.

In fact, in a section of one of his letters, Paul decisively says, “[Even] if I have prophetic powers, and understand *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, and if I have *all* faith . . . but have not love, *I am nothing*” (1 Corinthians 13:2, ESV, emphasis added). Only love—not knowledge and faith—he goes on to say, never ends and never fails. I can't stress this strongly enough: Armed with his love, we usher in the powerful, healing Kingdom of God . . . one battlefield, one relationship, one life at a time. Without knowing and experiencing God's love, we—and our broken world—have absolutely no hope.

This book is my attempt to point us toward our hope: a healer and deliverer named Jesus who offers us himself . . . and his all-encompassing love. It's about *how* to fall in love with Jesus—and then *how* to walk with Jesus, abiding in, surrounded by, protected by, and empowered by his love. You'll find nothing here about lists and shoulds. Our *how* begins with simply taking a step: accepting Jesus' invitation onto a relational pathway where we discover a love so powerful that it births our worship, obedience, and willingness to surrender all to him.

A few years ago, I got an e-mail from my close friend Gary—a successful and well-respected brother in our community—who had lived most of his life on the treadmill of performance and shame. He wrote,

I had a breakthrough today. I finally get it that my sense of value has been skewed since I was a kid. I've worked my entire life to earn the approval of parents, coaches, friends,

customers, pastors—and God. As long as I was successful, I was okay. I'm finally wrapping my heart around the truth that I am a beloved son of the Father and am loved regardless of what I do, whether I succeed or fail. I'm beginning to experience joy and freedom I didn't know was possible! I haven't arrived, but I'm on my way, and I want even more!⁶

This is a story I've heard over and over from those willing to make the journey from “just do it” Christianity to falling in love with the God who is in love with us. My brothers and sisters, this can be your story too!

Know this: The words to follow don't come from a mountaintop of arrival but from my own broken, sometimes halting experience of (still) learning to live in love with Jesus, of beginning to see him as my One Great Love. I pray that in reading, you are somehow encouraged to begin to let go of the futility, bondage, discouragement, shame, and despair of a religion that's only about trying harder. And that by the last page, you might even feel you know *how* to begin receiving—and keep choosing—freedom within the powerful, warm embrace of the One who loves you more than life itself.

Chapter 1

OUR ONE GREAT LOVE

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

I JOHN 4:16

To fall in love with God is the greatest romance.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me. . . . I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

DOMINIQUE VOILLAUME

Abiding in Jesus' love is learning to believe his love—is everything.*

“I REMEMBER THE DAY I WAS CHOSEN,” Nadia told me as we sat over coffee one afternoon. Earlier that morning, I had shared with her Bible-college class about Paul’s tender image of God adopting us “as his own children” (Romans 8:15, NLT). When I asked if anyone in the room had been adopted, Nadia shyly raised her hand, and later that day, she graciously recounted what adoption was like for her.

Nadia was born in an Eastern Bloc country, and her memories of the orphanage were bleak. Poor living conditions, abuse,

* Dominique Voillaume was a priest with the Little Brothers of Jesus. These were the last lines written in his diary before he died. Dominique never wrote a book, preached to large crowds, or entertained dignitaries, but he walked with God, abiding in Jesus’ love and loving those around him, especially the poor, with that same powerful, healing love. Seven thousand people attended his funeral.

loneliness—and worst of all, hopelessness. Nadia told me, “I didn’t really understand the adoption process, but I knew how it felt to watch other children get chosen to leave the orphanage—and then walk back to my room . . . alone.”

One day, when she was nine years old, Nadia was given a rare shower—“really only a few drops of water.” And then, her first dress ever. Finally, Nadia was taken into a room where a smiling man and woman waited for her. They ushered her to a waiting automobile—and quickly the newly formed trio was off to the airport for a long flight across Europe and the Atlantic Ocean to the US. Then Nadia found herself in another car, and eventually she arrived at a home larger and nicer than anything she had ever seen.

“To be honest, the whole time, I wasn’t completely sure what was happening,” she told me. “I’d rarely been in a car, never on a plane—and my grown-ups only spoke English. But everything became clear when after a bath, they tucked me in my own bed with a new pair of pajamas and fresh, crisp sheets. Then, the nice man leaned over and whispered—somehow in a way I could understand—‘From now on, sweetheart, call me Daddy.’ Pastor Kevin, at that moment I knew . . . I was home.”

This must have been what Paul wanted his readers to “feel”:

You have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.”

ROMANS 8:15, NLT

Listen carefully: We aren’t God’s slaves—we’re his beloved sons and daughters. And not by accident. He walked into the cosmic orphanage one day and *chose* us to be his children. Despite our baggage,

brokenness, and sin, he longed for us to be his own. Sometimes in my shame, I envision someone pulling God off to the side, pointing at me, and warning, “Uh, God, you really don’t want *this* one—let me tell you why.” But the truth is, he already knows all about me—not just my strengths and potential but also every unattractive detail and weakness. He knows about you, too. And yet, he chose—and chooses—us still. Because he’s our Father and he loves us.

In fact, in his letter to the Roman church, Paul intentionally uses an Aramaic term that implies even deeper intimacy: *Abba*. On the streets of Jerusalem, if you’re near a young Israeli family, you’ll hear the small children crying out, “Abba, Abba” if and when they call for their daddy. *Abba* is also the term Jesus used to address his Father in Gethsemane on the toughest night of his earthly life, when he felt alone and afraid (Mark 14:36).

When my girls were growing up, I was their pastor, their mother’s husband, co-owner of the home they lived in, and sometimes their coach . . . but our relationship flourished only when they could see me as their father—when they were secure enough in my love to call me *Daddy*. In the same way, Nadia finally understood her new life when she realized that the man who took her from the orphanage was now her loving father. Dear friends, please don’t miss this—we will only experience freedom in our relationship with God when we let go of our pressurized, shaming images of him and realize he’s our Father who chose us and adopted us because he loves us, that even though he’s our Creator, Lord, and King, he invites us to call him “Abba.”

Many of us feel more comfortable imagining the face of Jesus than God the Father. Recently, during a particularly difficult moment in her spiritual journey, Carla asked me, “Can I believe in Jesus and not believe in God?” This is a dilemma many of us face: “Jesus feels close and full of empathy. God sometimes feels distant and uncaring.”

But hear Jesus' words one more time: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9, ESV). Clearly, in the way they love us, the Father and the Son are inseparable. When Jesus invites us to "abide in my love," he could have easily said, "abide in our love." For sure, there is Trinitarian mystery here, but practically speaking, the Father and the Son love us in tandem. As we move into the abiding life, we'll find ourselves understanding and experiencing the love of both in deeper ways than ever before!

What if you woke each morning to the kind and gentle gaze of your loving Father? He's been sitting on the edge of your bed, waiting for you to wake up, watching over you with love and delight. What if the first words you heard as you began your day were these words of Jesus: "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain *intimately* at home in my love. . . . I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy" (John 15:9-15, MSG, emphasis added)? Imagine starting each day with this truth from the mouth of Jesus Christ himself, an invitation to step into a rhythm of life where our focus isn't obedience but instead his love—which inspires obedience filled with joy! Drudgery, dread, and bondage would immediately be replaced by excitement, anticipation, and freedom.

Some of you may remember Sophia from *Choose and Choose Again*. Many years ago, she found herself on the streets of Detroit—lonely, abused, saturated with shame, desperately trying to fill her emptiness and numb her pain through drugs and prostitution.¹ When she finally realized that the love of Jesus was everything she was looking for, she walked away from decades of darkness.

A few weeks ago, I got this text from Sophia—who today has her GED, is employed, and is restoring her relationships with the children that she abandoned during her empty years: "Pastor Butcher,

Jesus Christ continues to reign in my life!! His love is the foundation on which I stand!!! He is the Alpha and the Omega and is still sooo much alive in me!!! Hallelujah!” Every exclamation point jubilantly shouts the passionate love and joy that feeds her relationship with Jesus.

But for many of us, this kind of love-filled, joy-saturated life is far removed from our experience. Instead, the first thing we “see” when we get up in the morning is a list of imposing rules staring at us, immediately and threateningly demanding our obedience. Some of the rules are human-made churchy legalisms, for sure. But much of the list is essentially good—commands given from the heart of a loving God, pointing to a pathway that leads to life. Yet in John 15:9, Jesus doesn’t call us to begin with God’s good and life-giving commands. Instead, he instructs us to first receive and make our home in his love. Jesus is clear: *Passionate obedience flows out of living in love*—and ironically, that very obedience leads us to a deeper abiding (John 15:10)!

Unfortunately, that’s not what most of us—even veteran followers of Jesus, lifelong churchgoers, serious Bible students, Sunday-school teachers, and church leaders—believe to be true. We may say we believe it, but our lives speak a different reality. Many of us haven’t even heard this truth before. I don’t recall much talk about God’s love in seminary. When we studied Ephesians line by line, my gifted professors appropriately emphasized “by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8)—but not so much “God chose us in Christ . . . in *love*” (Ephesians 1:4, author’s paraphrase) or “because of His great *love* with which He *loved* us” (Ephesians 2:4) or “that you, being rooted and grounded in *love*” (Ephesians 3:17) or “as *beloved* children . . . walk in *love*” (Ephesians 5:1-2, esv; all emphasis added). Yes, God’s grace is of paramount importance because it’s how

he gives us life. But God's love motivates his grace—he is gracious to us because he loves us. God's love is his heart, his soul. His love is virtually ground zero of everything he feels about us and does for us. God's love isn't just another of his attributes. My friends, *God is love* (1 John 4:16).

One evening when Carla was out, I decided to sort through some mementos from our girls when they were young. Big mistake—especially alone! I pulled out a tiny note my then-seven-year-old Leigh Anne had written me years earlier—in sky-blue letters surrounded by sky-blue hearts: “I love Mi Daddy, from Leigh Anne.” Of course, I dad-cried and immediately texted my grown-up daughter, who tenderly replied, “I’ve always just wanted to be your little girl, much like my heart really just longs to be God’s precious daughter. What a great parallel. I love you, Dad.” Leigh Anne has two degrees, is an accomplished therapist, and has an incredibly full life. But her moment-by-moment core reality as a professional woman, wife, mom, and human being is the love of a God who calls himself her Father. A love mirrored in my love for her and reflected in every love she experiences. Are you feeling this? God’s love was never designed to be a sidebar concern. His love is meant to be . . . everything.

This truth about the centrality of God’s love explains so much about Jesus’ emphasis on abiding in his love. The context of his words in John 15 is crucial. On the night before his death (John 13) Jesus had the rapt attention of his eleven closest followers. He had just explained that he was leaving, that they couldn’t follow—and that from now on they would *be him* in the broken, hostile world around them. The disciples anxiously hung on every word as they waited for Jesus to tell them what was next, what to do, how to survive, how to continue his Kingdom mission . . . and it’s in this decisive, pivotal moment that Jesus commanded, “Abide in My love” (John 15:9).

Because the bottom line is this—the love of God in Jesus Christ is the soil from which *everything* in God’s Kingdom germinates, grows, and flourishes. When we choose to replace that love with try-harder, shame-based religion, his Kingdom shrivels and dies because we’re no longer rooted in the source of all life. Christianity’s emphasis on the “rules”—what Greg Boyd calls our post-Genesis 3 obsession with “good and evil”²—and the corresponding dismissal of Jesus’ abiding love as relatively insignificant, are lies from hell that are killing us *and* our healing, redemptive impact on the world.

Listen: The reason we can’t conquer racism isn’t because we don’t have enough seminars or dialogues on race but because we don’t believe his love is everything—a powerful love that topples racist societal structures, moves perpetrators to repent, and compels the wounded to forgive. One reason broken relationships in the church look so much like those in our culture isn’t because we don’t have enough books or small groups about healing marriages and pursuing reconciliation in our families but because we don’t believe his love is everything—a covenant love that sacrifices for the other even when others have nothing left to give. The reason we don’t see more hurting human beings come to faith in Jesus Christ isn’t because we haven’t found the perfect evangelism strategy but because we don’t believe his love is everything—a compassionate, pursuing love that moves us toward those who don’t yet believe, a compelling love that can overwhelm the defenses of the most ardent skeptic and draw them home to the Father.

For certain, a rules-based, love-starved faith almost killed me. By the time I was thirty-six, three decades removed from my first encounter with the love of God, my life dripped the poison of years of immersion in hell’s counterfeit, rule-saturated version of walking with Jesus. It was the only Christianity I knew. In 1990, I had

been pastoring seven years and found myself leading my second church while embracing the latest version of “the list”—preaching perfect sermons, trying to make everyone happy, working ungodly long hours—while secretly petrified of failure and always thinking I should have done more. I was successful, married to my best friend, the father of three incredible daughters . . . and yet, experiencing precious little of the Father’s love. I was an empty shell inside—a dead man walking.

I’m convinced my story is not an isolated one. Perhaps you, too, are feeling dead inside, reeling from the impact of a false Christianity’s focus on rules and relegation of God’s love to secondary status. Perhaps you’re empty and spiritually exhausted from long days of sweating and trying and striving to please a God who seems impossible to please. Maybe you’re near tears as you read these words and sense your deep longing for intimacy with the One who, from the beginning, has presented himself to us as our One Great Love. What if you could begin to let go of all the false images of God as a demanding tyrant—and begin to believe he’s a good Father who deeply loves . . . you?

As a lifelong Cubs fan, I’ll never forget the day I first took my three girls to Wrigley Field. The look of wonder on their faces as they experienced the sights and sounds of a major-league ballpark was priceless. Before we found our seats, I led them to the nearest concession stand, knelt next to them, arm around all three as they huddled near me, and pointed to the neon menu. “Girls,” I said, “do you see what I see? Popcorn, hot dogs, ice-cream sandwiches, lemon ice, Cracker Jack, cotton candy! Today, whatever you want—it’s yours!” Then, I pointed to the souvenir stand a few feet away, filled with Cubs T-shirts, baseball hats, autographed balls, key chains, pennants, and bobble heads. “Ladies, before we go home today, whatever you

like—it’s yours!” All three nodded their heads rapidly, eyes wide as saucers, as if thinking, *Can this be happening? Can our daddy really love us this much?* Recently, I asked the girls if they remembered this childhood moment—and they did—but Leigh Anne articulated a feeling that seemed to express what they all felt: “Of course I remember, Dad. But the truth is, it wasn’t just the Cubs game. I remember lots of moments of you doing that exact same thing at lots of different places. *That’s just how you always were with us.*”

Remember Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son, who comes home after years of partying, determined to tell his dad how sorry he is and how he no longer deserves to be his son? But when his dad sees him coming down the road, he runs to meet him, compassionately hugs and kisses him, and lavishes him with gifts, including a welcome-home party! And then, the father also pursues the rule-keeping older brother, tenderly reminding him, “Dear son . . . everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31, NLT). Do you see it? The father in the story represents the God who is *our* Father, and he’s not about *demanding from us*—but lavishly and compassionately *giving to us*. Because he loves us. Worn-out brother or sister, that’s how he always is with us. That’s how he always is . . . with you.

One thing I know is that everywhere I describe *this kind of love* and how central it is, with an audience of thousands or a brother or sister over coffee—the response is always the same. “Why haven’t I heard this before? How could I go to church all these years and come away knowing everything about the rules—but knowing so little of God’s extravagant love? No wonder I’m desperate and empty inside. No wonder most days, I just want to be done.” And then, the tears begin to fall.

Here’s the difficult truth: The church has “left [its] first love” (Revelation 2:4). We’ve traded our relational birthright of living

freely, powerfully, and redemptively as God's beloved sons and daughters for a porridge chock-full of rules. We've pawned the pearl of great price—the precious, personal, abiding love of Jesus—for a few religious coins. Most of us haven't heard that God's love is everything because to so many of us, even those in church leadership, it is not. Over fifty years ago, renowned continental theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that if the church didn't begin to live as if God's love was central, our world had “scarcely any chance left of encountering the heart of Christianity.”³ I'm worried that what he prophesied is here.

So, what to do? Most importantly, *we must reject the satanic lie that Jesus' love is somehow secondary—and choose to embrace the truth that his love is everything.* Because you can be sure of this: If we think anything else is more foundational than his love—that space is where we will make our home. When we do that, the enemy will have us right where he wants us, saturating our lives in good things, even spiritual things, while we miss the power of the main thing—the love of God in Jesus Christ.

A key turning point for me—a moment when I began to own his love as everything—was when I discovered that the centrality of God's love in Christ isn't about what I say or what anyone else says. It's about what the Bible has always clearly said:

- > *Genesis*: In the very beginning, God presents himself as our One Great Love, creating Adam and Eve “by the fire of love”⁴ and then walking intimately, daily⁵ with them in the Garden (Genesis 3:8).
- > *Deuteronomy*: God's love is central when he tells Israel he chose her simply because he loves her (Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:7-8) and

then calls his people first and foremost to “love the LORD [their] God with all [their] heart[s]” in return (Deuteronomy 6:5-6).

- > *Psalms*: God’s love is the heart of David’s cry, “Give thanks to the LORD, for . . . His faithful love endures forever” (Psalm 107:1, NLT).
- > *Song of Solomon*: We hear echoes of God’s love for us and our love for him in the passionate utterances of a young Shulamite bride: “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine”; “his banner over me was love” (Song of Solomon 6:3; 2:4).
- > *Isaiah*: God’s love permeates his promise to Zion: “I will not forget you. . . . I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands” (Isaiah 49:15-16).
- > *Hosea*: God calls the prophet to love an unfaithful, struggling prostitute to prove to Israel that even when she forgets him, “I will betroth you to me forever . . . in steadfast love” (Hosea 2:19-20, ESV).
- > *Romans*: Paul proclaims love as the heart of our identity in Christ, declaring that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).
- > *Galatians*: Love is crucial to what some describe as Paul’s life verse: “the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).
- > *1 Peter*: God’s love informs Peter’s core understanding of our life with Jesus—“whom having not seen [we] love” (1 Peter 1:8).

- > *1 John*: The beloved disciple declares that love is God’s very essence: “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16, *ESV*).
- > *Jude*: God’s love is central to Jude’s instruction for spiritual battle: “Keep yourselves in the love of God” (Jude 1:21).
- > *Revelation*: John’s mystical vision is dedicated “to Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood” (Revelation 1:5).

And nowhere in the biblical narrative is the love of God more central than in the story of the Cross: “God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16, *ESV*, emphasis added). Bishop Kallistos Ware says it powerfully:

“It is finished” . . . is to be understood, not as a cry of resignation or despair, but as a cry of victory: It is completed, it is accomplished, it is fulfilled.

What has been fulfilled? . . . The work of suffering love, the victory of love over hatred. Christ our God has loved his own to the uttermost.⁶

No wonder Jesus, at the end of his life, calls his disciples—and us—to “abide in [his] love.” He knew beyond doubt that this intimate relationship with our God—our husband, our Abba, our One Great Love—was intended to be the lifeblood of our journey with him. Jesus, the eternal Logos of God, knew that his love . . . is everything.

A few years back, I led a men’s retreat in northern Arizona. After the Friday evening session, Derek approached me, and a few moments into our conversation, it was clear we had much in common—walking

alongside our wives as they battled cancer, a deep passion to be good fathers, and the ever-present struggle to become better men. Derek was gifted, articulate, and easy to talk with, so by the time we walked to the dining hall for late-night pizza, our hearts were genuinely connecting. At the end of the evening, I placed my hands on Derek's shoulders, looked at him with my father eyes, and tenderly said, "I love you, son." I embraced him, then made my way back to my room. Derek didn't say much in the moment, but sometime later, he sent me a text: "Hey Kev, I wanted you to know that while I've said 'I love you, son' a thousand times to my boys over the years, I didn't realize how much I longed to hear those words said to me."

Right now, I'm thinking about each of you, with tears. My sisters and brothers, fellow weary travelers, struggling with difficult life circumstances and a Christianity that offers you nothing more for the journey than a bundle of religious rules and a shaming voice whispering, *Try harder*. But here's what I'm praying you're beginning to understand: God isn't shame-based Christianity. God is your Father. He chose you, he still chooses you—and right now, his strong, tender hands are on *your* shoulders, he's gazing into *your* eyes, and speaking words *your* heart has been longing to hear: "I love you, son. I will always love you, daughter. From now on, call me Abba."

United Pursuit sings, "I'm laying down all my religion . . . I want to know you, Lord."⁷ What are you hanging on to, focusing on, or abiding in that is keeping you from taking an all-embracing step toward the abiding love of God in Jesus Christ? Are you ready to lay it down in order to know him and abide in him? Are you ready to choose the joy, the power, and the freedom of walking with him as your One Great Love? The Jesus of John 15:9 is very near. His loving hands are open, and his strong-yet-gentle voice is calling: "Abide. Abide in my love."